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DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

AND OTHER STORIES.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

A STORY OF TUSCAN LIFE

AND OTHER STORIES.

BY T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE.

AUTHOR OF "LINDISFARN CHASE," "A SIREN," "LA BEATA," ETC.

In Two Volumes.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.
1875.

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CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS.

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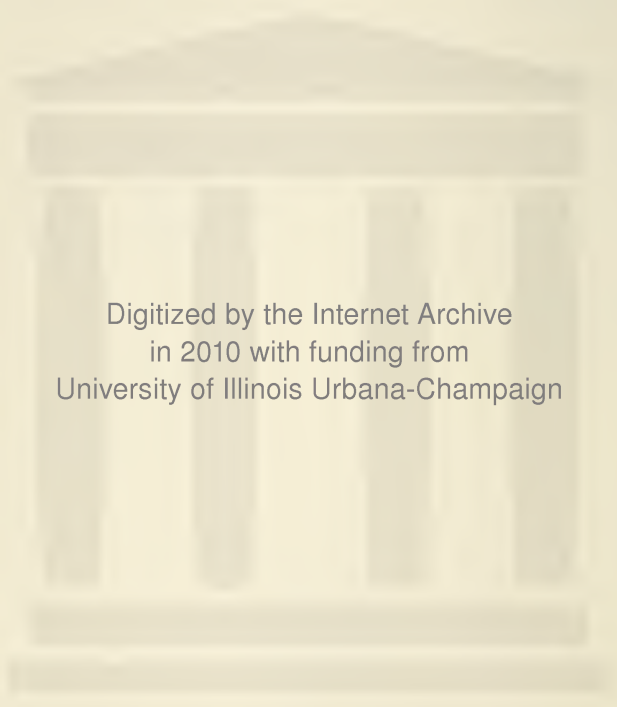
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DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE DUCHESS VERONICA.

CHAPTER I.

FAMINE, PESTILENCE, AND MARRIAGE.

By the united efforts of the Emperor Charles the Fifth and the Medicean Pope, Clement the Seventh, liberty was finally destroyed, and the despotism of the Medici established in Florence in the year 1531. In the year 1631, Ferdinand the Second, the fifth grand-duke, was reigning in Tuscany; and a hundred years of despotism had done their work on the country according to the immutable laws in such cases appointed and ordained.

At the former epoch there was assuredly much passing among those lovely vine-and-olive-clad hills, and beneath those pure azure skies, which might have made angels weep, if we are to suppose them to look down on the fair earth man has inhabited, and the use he makes of it. There was

blood on all the land, in the streets of every fair city, and almost on every smiling hill-side. Liberty died hard and slowly, amid convulsive throes, social confusion, and multiform violence. There was deadly feud between family and family, and in many cases between fathers and sons. There were crimes, treasons, falsehoods, follies, shortcomings innumerable. But there were also some heroisms; and, until hope was finally crushed, there were many noble aspirations. Intellect was awake, and was winning some of its noblest triumphs. Even material prosperity, and the creation of wealth, which had risen to so marvellous a height under the old municipal freedom, though sadly injured and hindered by the prevailing disorder and violence, was not smitten with paralysis. For industry and energy were yet alive; and—as a rich soil cultivated with difficulty amid rocks and tree-stumps will give golden harvests—contrived, despite all impediments, to realise magnificent results.

In the year 1631 every feature of this picture had become changed. The country presented every symptom of moral and material decrepitude. From having occupied the highest rank in Europe in literature, science, and art, Tuscany, and Italy generally, were rapidly sinking to all but the lowest. Vast wealth indeed remained, the produce, either of former activity and enterprise, or of

a legislation craftily contrived by means of monopolies and such like suicidal devices, to gather into a few hands at the expense of general pauperisation. The grand-dukes themselves, especially, had by such means amassed enormous treasures. But wealth thus collected into unproductive masses engenders a social malaria as pestilential as that caused physically by huge bodies of stagnant water, instead of the beneficent and fertilising effect which resembles that of the same element duly distributed and put into motion. Agriculture was neglected; commerce well-nigh annihilated; population was decreasing. But "order" had been established. All was very orderly in Church and State. There were no rebellions and no heresies. No man dreamed of disputing the absolute authority of the Government over his body, or of the Church over his soul. Not, indeed, that this "order" insured safety to life and property in the one department, or any tolerably satisfactory state of religious and moral feeling in the other. For the stiletto of the assassin was rife in the streets and palaces of Florence; and rarely—saving always of course at Rome—has the world seen such utter demoralisation and general dissoluteness combined with profuse religious professions and practices, as prevailed under Medicean rule.

Then there came upon all that festering mass of

wickedness, laziness, folly, luxury, misery, prodigality, beggary, ignorance, and general incapacity of all sorts—"visitations of God"—came as surely as comets return in their course; and they *were* visitations of God as certainly as are marsh-fevers from the fens on the sluggards who will not drain them, and all the other penal and teaching evils, resulting from man's mismanagement of the moral and material elements which the all-wise Creator has destined to furnish his rewards, his punishments, and his education.

Pestilence came, and famine came. And, as we find from the historians, without surprise, all the means which were adopted for the remedy of these evils only seemed to make matters worse. The gathering of masses of the people in processions and in the churches to implore the interposition of the Virgin did not stay the pestilence; and the prohibition of all commercial intercourse or transport of commodities, failed to alleviate the scarcity. But though we may not be astonished at these phenomena, the seventeenth-century Tuscans were so. It was a terrible *disgrazia*; a tremendous indication that the "favour" of Heaven was withdrawn from the land. And every man saw in the general affliction a castigation due to the sins of his neighbours.

It does not appear to have occurred to many that their own sins had aught to do with the judgment,

which all agreed that the general wickedness of the community had brought down upon it. The religious frame of mind indicated by the prevalence of such reflections does not seem to have availed in any degree to effect any improvement in the general morality. On the contrary, as has always been observed to be the case under similar circumstances, recklessness of living, excesses and irregularities of all kinds, became very manifestly more general and unbridled than ever. The testimony of history to the effect produced on masses of men by any circumstances enhancing in an extraordinary degree the usual uncertainty of life and forcing it on their attention, is unvarying. Permanent danger to life, whether from pestilence, war, or other causes, has, very observably, ever made the reflection, "to-morrow we die," lead to the conclusion, "let us eat and drink," rather than to any line of conduct more rationally in accordance with the presumed theories of the minds thus acted on.

The morals, accordingly, of all classes were never at a lower ebb in Florence than at the period which has been spoken of. The plague had raged in the cities of Tuscany in 1630, but in the following year had almost disappeared. In 1633 it broke out again with greater virulence than ever, and brought famine—or at least a near approach to famine—with it in its train. As usual, the "visitation" had

fallen most terribly on the poorer classes of the people, thus affording a very edifying proof of what might otherwise not have been imagined:—that the national sins which had occasioned it, must have been in the main the sins of the commonalty. But at the second outbreak, several personages of high position fell victims to it, and great was the consternation produced by so alarming an innovation. The panic became universal, and the prevalent dissoluteness of living coextensive.

It was near noon on a bright day of autumn in this terrible year, 1633, that old Giustino Canacci and his son Bartolommeo came out of a house in the Via dei Pilastri, near the church of Sant' Ambrogio, still noted as the scene of some of the events about to be narrated in the following pages. The old man was in his seventieth year; the young one about twenty-five.

“There they go!” said the senior, after glancing up and down the street; “another house shut up, and the mark on the door since last night. Ah! it’s neighbour Faldì this time! Well! well! we are here to-day, and gone to-morrow.”

“Not you!” said his son, savagely. “No such luck! You don’t look like going to-morrow, nor the day after neither.”

“You’ll look like it, reprobate that you are, long before you are my age,” returned the sire. “A

pretty life you are leading, drunk half the day and all the night, and the deaths in the quarter increasing every day!"

"Yes! a proper sort of time in Florence it is, isn't it, for an old scarecrow like you to be thinking of marrying, of all things in the world! With nothing but plague and famine all round one, you must needs want a wife—you! who ought to be in your grave, plague or no plague, before now. Ugh! It's disgusting! You look like a bridegroom, don't you?"

"More like one, I think, than you, my son, at all events," said the old man, scanning with a look of unconcealed aversion the debauched, discreditable-looking figure and bloated evil countenance of the young man. "But now," he added, "since the pestilence won't take either of us, and it is a pity but what it should clear the house of one of us, do you go about your business, which is to gamble with some rake-hell or other at the Garden* there, till you are too drunk to hold your cards, and let me go about mine."

"Mine is an honestest business than what you are going after, any way, you old wretch! May the murrain take you as you pass through the streets!" said Bartolommeo Canacci, as he turned and slouched away towards the tavern, while his

* A tavern so called, existing at that time in the Via dei Pilastri.

father commenced his walk in the opposite direction.

It was perfectly true, that old Giustino Canacci was bent on the preposterous step of taking to himself a second wife, now, while young and old were dying around him, and it might be supposed that marrying and giving in marriage would have found but small place in men's minds. It was true, also, that in one point of view at all events, he looked more fitted to become a bridegroom than his reprobate son. He was a hale and well-preserved man, who carried his seventy years as well as so heavy a load could be borne, while his son Bartolommeo was already old at twenty-five. Beyond this, it would have been difficult to say which of the pair was the less desirable and more unpromising, regarded in the character of a suitor. The countenance of each was villainously bad, each in its own way. There was the same low brow and absence of forehead in both. But in the old man the narrow-pinched temples, and the backward slope of the frontal bone, indicated poverty and meanness of intellect, while the equally low but somewhat protruding and broader forehead of his son imparted a character of ferocity and brutality to the physiognomy. The small and twinkling grey eyes of the senior, set in the centre of a converging spider's net of wrinklings, spoke plainly of low cunning,

watchfulness, and suspicion. The dull blood-shot orbs of the junior, under their penthouse of black shaggy brow, gave warning that the haggard lack-lustre deadness, which resulted from habitual excess, might at small provocation be changed to active malignity and cruelty. The style of dress of both father and son was as little prepossessing as might be. The old man looked mouldy, thread-bare, and faded. The young one tawdry, slovenly, and wine-stained. Shabbiness and dirt were common to both.

Nevertheless, true it was that old Giustino Canacci was going a wooing; going, moreover, in no diffident mood; but with a very tolerable assurance that his suit would be a successful one. For it was, in a word, the old story. The old man had seen an article which he fancied suited him—miserable old fool—and had determined on buying it. Not that Signor Canacci was a wealthy man, far from it; but he was “pauper in ære suo;” he had wherewithal to live, and to keep a wife, too, in decent comfort and quite respectable idleness. The house from which he had just issued with that amiable son of his was his own, and was a something more than decent and respectable home. And then the times! Amid the universal distress, and misery, and precariousness, money was money, even ever so little of it; and a home was a home, even though shared with such a partner as Signor

Canacci. The matrimonial market, like every other market, was dreadfully depressed. Who thought of marrying in those days of terror? Why, there were girls in every street, very eligible ones too, orphans without the assurance of bread to eat or roof-tree to cover them for four-and-twenty hours to come; and more dreading to become so with every returning morning, and looking into the black hopeless future with despairing eyes. How many fathers of well-conditioned families, reduced to ruin by the hardness of the times and the stagnation of all business, looking, too, to the probability from day to day of leaving an unprotected daughter adrift upon the distracted world of that miserable, reckless, and disorganised society, would jump at the chance of securing for them the snug and safe, though modest competence, assured to the mistress of Casa Canacci! "Yes, yes!" thought old Giustino to himself, "if the times are good for nothing else, they are good for finding a wife. Not much danger of a refusal of a good home nowadays!"

Pleasing himself with these reflections, the old man went on his errand, walking firmly and uprightly through the streets, now beginning to have some stir and movement in them as the hour of noon drew near.

Taking his way towards the Arno, he passed across the large open square in front of the church

of Santa Croce. There, in one of the houses forming the side of the square opposite to the west front of the church, was situated one of those places for the gratuitous distribution of food, which had recently been established in various parts of the city by the young grand-duke, then in his twenty-third year, as a measure of relief to his starving subjects. The attempt was well intended; but, carried into effect with the rude simplicity and ignorance characteristic of the time and people, it was not only as inefficient for good as those other provisions against pestilence and famine which have been alluded to, but, like them, was productive of very serious increase of the calamities it was meant to alleviate. A modicum of the coarsest and cheapest food was given to any applicant. Those who are not really pressed by want, thought the prince and his counsellors, will not seek so uninviting a meal. A modern relieving-officer would have known better. All those who previously had, by dint of striving, succeeded in obtaining wherewithal to keep body and soul together, found it more agreeable to do this at the duke's cost than by their own exertions. And, of course, increased pauperisation rapidly followed the establishment of the grand-ducal relieving kitchens. It followed, moreover, from the simplicity of the plan of giving the food to the first comer, that those who were least entitled to relief were by far the most sure of

obtaining it. The stout pair of shoulders, that might have earned a bit of bread for their owner, thrust aside the emaciated wretch already half-starved, the aged crone, or fragile girl, who had nought but an alms between them and absolute starvation. And a scene of fighting, screaming, pushing, despairing, cursing, was daily reproduced in front of the distribution places, which added a characteristic feature to the other painful and disorderly sights and sounds that made the streets of Florence horrible.

The hour of noon struck as Signor Giustino was passing by that end of the large piazza. It was the time at which the distribution began. And immediately as the hour was struck from the neighbouring tower of the Palazzo Vecchio, the crowd, which had for an hour or more been collected in front of the door, began to sway and undulate as if shaken by a tempest wind. Every voice was raised. The men cursed and pushed, the women screamed and scratched. There was small hope for the most helpless and hopeless among them. Yet the first served at the hatch-door that day was a woman evidently half-starved and old. With desperate tenacity the miserable creature had clung on by a huge iron ring on the door, and had so, despite buffetings and imprecations, succeeded in keeping the place she had secured by being the earliest comer hours ago in the morning. Having

received her dole, which she forthwith enveloped in a portion of the rags which hung about her to secure it from the greedy hands around, she was speedily and roughly hustled out from the throng, and thus reached the outskirts of it, half-dead with long fasting, long standing, and struggling. Then appeared the ruling passion which had given the poor creature the force to withstand the buffetings of the crowd and the fatigue of the long struggle. Outside the crowd, on a door-step close to the spot where old Giustino stood amusedly looking on at the throng fighting for life, on the "*sauve mari magno*" principle, sat a wan emaciated figure, a girl of some seventeen years, who had been pretty once. To her the victorious mother brought the mess of beans, the produce of her hard fight and long endurance. It was only in a mother that spirit could thus conquer matter in that dire strife, for the starving girl eagerly devoured the entire pittance, while the old woman looked on with eyes in which the wolfish expression of her own extreme animal need was strangely blended with satisfaction at the relief of pangs sharper to her than her own.

Signor Canacci laughed a sardonic laugh as he looked on at the pair.

"Ah!" said he to himself, "now that is just what I should like Caterina to see with her own eyes. Yes, that is what girls no worse off than she

may easily come to nowadays. Better, I think, to be La Signora Canacci, with a good house over one's head, and a decent meal on the table every day. Yes, yes, Caterina will know on which side her bread is buttered; she will say 'Yes!' fast enough, and 'Thank you, sir!' into the bargain."

Muttering thus to himself the old man continued his way to the Lung'arno, as the street is called which runs along the river bank, forming a magnificent terrace from one end of the city to the other. It is more magnificent now than it was at the date of this narrative. For after having remained much as it was in the seventeenth century till within these two years, it has recently been embellished and widened by new river-walls and parapets and other ameliorations after the fashion of the nineteenth century. But such improvements can rarely be attained in the mediæval cities of Italy, save at the cost of destroying some interesting memorial of the past. And here on the Lung'arno, just where Signor Canacci emerged on it from the narrow streets behind it, the very smart cut-stone front of a specially hideous new Bank and Chamber of Commerce now occupies the spot on which stood, a few months ago, one of the most singular and picturesque structures in Florence. It was a huge dyeing establishment, which had remained unchanged, amid so many changes around it, since the days when the dyed woollens of Flor-

ence were celebrated in every part of Europe, and formed one of the principal sources of the vast wealth of the old republic. That industry, like every other, had languished and declined under the grand-dukes; but it was still carried on in this spot, as indeed it was till the dyers were, much against their will, turned out the other day by the genius of modern improvement.

It cannot be said that the old dyeing-house was beautiful, that it bore the slightest resemblance to any order of architecture ever heard of, or that to the eye of any city-surveyor, architect, or sanitary reformer, it was even decent. But it was very strange, very unlike anything else in the nineteenth-century world, and withal singularly picturesque. From vaults below the level of the street, four or five huge cavernous mouths opened on the public way, from which dense bodies of vapour were always issuing forth, while bare-armed and strangely-tinted figures might be dimly descried around steaming vats in the chiaroscuro of the *dén* within. Piles and acres of newly-dyed goods were heaped around these doorways, or hung out to dry on the opposite parapet-wall, in innocent ignorance of the most rudimentary ideas of street police or the rights of his majesty the Public; but to the great delight of any disciple of Prout in want of a bit of colour. The walls of the building over these vaults reached only to the height of one story.

But above that, raised on timbers at the height of about two stories more, and thus covering a vast space of open terrace, was such a roof as never entered into the mind of a modern builder to conceive. There must have been timber enough in it to have furnished forth a dozen "Prospect-rows" or "Bellevue-buildings." The huge beams—each a tree from the pine forests of the Apennines—crossed each other in every possible direction and at every imaginable angle. And high in air was the enormous beetle-browed roof, with its mellow-coloured red tiling, projecting far on all sides beyond the basement of the structure. Then must be imagined all the wondrous play of light and shadow as the rays of an Italian sun darted in and lost themselves among that quaint forest of timbers; and further, the effect of the long pendant draperies of newly and brightly-dyed stuffs hung up here and there among the recesses of the labyrinth of beams; and then it will be understood that the old roof of the dyers was a bit of Florence dear to an artist's heart.

And there it stood unchanged for more than two centuries after Signor Giustino Canacci's visit. Now it is gone, and a prim, more or less Palladian Bank stands in its place.

As Signor Canacci passed along the front of the building, he saw the man he was in search of, sitting listlessly on a little bench at the entrance

to one of the vaults which have been described. Each of these was tenanted by a different member of the trade, although the terrace above and the roof were in common to all of them. Time had been when Pasquale* Bassi was a flourishing and well-to-do citizen; but "the times" had well-nigh ruined him, as they had many others. His wife and a son had died recently of the plague. One daughter, Caterina, remained to him. If the pestilence spared him, it seemed that the task of maintaining her and himself in decent respectability would become every day a more difficult one. And if it struck him down, she would be left wholly unprotected and unprovided on the world—and on such a world!

Under these circumstances, it was not strange that the poor dyer, instead of hurrying home to his dinner at noon, sat sadly thinking at the door of his nearly empty and idle workshop.

"Good day, friend Pasquale," said Giustino, as he came up to him; "how goes the world with you this morning?"

"Ah! Messer Giustino! Your servant! Will you walk into my poor place?"

"No, my friend; let us have a little talk here.

* The maiden family name of Caterina is not mentioned by the chroniclers. That in the text, therefore, is fictitious. The other names are historical.

Fresh air, and the sky for ceiling, is better than many a chamber in these days."

"That's true, signore, God knows!" returned the dyer, making room for his visitor on the little bench.

"And how goes business? Nothing to brag of, eh?" said the old man, sitting down.

"Nothing can be worse, Messer Giustino; and yet I suppose it *will* be worse, for we are not starved to death yet!"

"Nay! there is surely less danger of that than usual. There is such a good chance of escaping it by dying of the plague. But it is, I admit, a comfortable thing in these times to depend on no man and no business for one's bed and board."

"Ay! for my part I wish I was out of it all, one way or other. If it were not for Caterina, I would not cross the street to avoid the murrain."

"My dear friend, don't let the Signora Caterina stand in your way in the matter. Here I am to renew my proposal and receive your answer. I offer Caterina a sure and comfortable home, and a respectable position at my death. Have you made your reflections? Is it to be a match?"

"Of course, illustrissimo Signore Giustino, the proposal of such an alliance is too great an honour for our poor house; and most true it is that in such a time it would be an unspeakable comfort to settle my poor motherless girl so unexceptionably. But

pardon me if I allude to one circumstance that causes me some misgiving. Il Signore Bartolommeo, your excellent son! Do you think that his residence with so young a mother-in-law would—that is, might, perhaps——”

“Caro mio! what are you dreaming of? Assuredly I should never ask Caterina to live in the house with Bartolommeo. But hark, in your ear. I am tired of living in the house with him myself. Out he goes, and that to-morrow. And after all it will not be much difference to him, for he well-nigh lives at the pot-house as it is. No, no! Put Bartolommeo quite out of the question.”

“Honestly, most respected sir, under other circumstances, I might have wished—certainly not a more honourable establishment for my poor Caterina; indeed, we never could have aspired to such an alliance—but, to speak frankly, a husband more of her own time of life. She is not yet sixteen, *la poveretta!*” added the father, with a heavy sigh; “but paying due attention to the just reflections your worship has put before me, I do think that I cannot do better for my poor girl than accept your honourable and flattering proposals.”

“Basta! that’s settled, then. And now, my poor Pasquale, is it not a comfort to think that you may die in peace of the plague to-morrow, and leave Caterina well provided for?”

“Signore, it *is* a comfort. She is all I have left; and she was always, as your worship knows, the sunbeam in our poor house; as good a girl, Signore Giustino, as ever father and mother had—docile, obedient, gentle, loving; modest, always contented to be at home, never gadding after admiration; and you know, Signor Giustino, whether she has had temptation in that line! A good girl, Signor Canacci, a good girl; and I trust she may make a dutiful wife.”

“I doubt it not, my friend! A home-keeping daughter will make a home-keeping wife; and that is what I want. Now, I will go straight to Messrs. Jacopo Buonaccorsi, and tell him to prepare the contract. We won’t lose time, for who knows how much we may have of it? When shall I come and have a talk with Caterina?”

“To-night, after the Ave Maria, if you will, Ser Giustino.”

“Hum! . . . after the Ave Maria? . . . I like to be at home, with my doors well shut and bolted, after the Ave Maria, friend Pasquale. It’s not good walking in the streets after sun-down nowadays in Florence. Suppose we say to-morrow, at this hour?”

“At your pleasure, Signor Giustino. Caterina shall expect you at mid-day to-morrow.”

“God have you then in his keeping, my good Pasquale, till this time to-morrow.”

“Signor Giustino, I kiss your hands. At this hour to-morrow.”

And so the ruined dyer and his proposed son-in-law parted.

As soon as the latter was out of sight, Pasquale Bassi rose slowly from his seat, and walked with downcast eyes and thoughtful brow towards the desolate home in a neighbouring street, where Caterina was expecting his mid-day return from the workshop, to announce to her the destiny that awaited her.

But it must not be imagined from the poor dyer's evident heavy-heartedness, that his care was caused by any such feelings as might be supposed to darken the heart of an English nineteenth-century father, about to make a similar communication to his daughter. It was rather the general aspect of the times and his own imminent ruin that caused the Florentine father's melancholy. Few such, probably, in his position would have admitted, even to the extent Pasquale Bassi had in his conversation with Canacci, that a younger bridegroom would have been more desirable than a match with a patrician living in his own house and independently on his own means. The prevailing feelings and ideas with regard to marriage were such, and similar unions were so far from rare, that none of the repugnance was likely to be felt, either by the girl thus sold or by her family, which a

similar proposal would excite in a sounder and healthier state of society.

So, when Pasquale Bassi reached the still decent but sadly desolate home, from which two of its inmates had recently been snatched by the pestilence, and much of its material plenishing carried off by the distress arising from it, and found poor Caterina sitting in solitude at the window waiting for him, the news he brought her produced none of the emotion which differently situated and differently bred damsels might have felt. She was sitting disconsolately enough, with her distaff at her shoulder and the spindle between her fingers; but they had forgotten to twirl it. Her head had fallen on her bosom, and her mind was busy with the utter hopelessness of the prospect before and around her.

“Caterina, my child,” said the father, “I have had Messer Giustino with me. He came for my answer; and he is to be here at mid-day to-morrow. He has now gone to his lawyer to order the contract to be prepared. My child! my child!” added he, after a long pause, “God grant that it may be well with thee!”

“But, father! that horrible man—that son of his—that Bartolommeo!”

“I spoke of that, my Caterina; and Ser Giustino said that he would no longer live in the house—that he himself could not live with him.”

“Ah! that is a great point gained, my dearest father! That was my greatest dread. With Ser Giustino I shall do very well, doubt it not. He means well; and I will do my duty by him. But I am loth to leave you, my father—all alone here,” she added, with a glance round the desolate room, “and in such times too!”

“I have got it in my head, Caterina mia, that it is I who will leave you before long. And you may guess whether my mind is easier at the thought of leaving you, at least in a safe and honourable home.”

“My own darling father! do not talk in that manner. All will yet be well. These dreadful days will pass away, the business will revive, and we shall talk over the bad time of the pestilence often of a winter evening in Casa Canacci.”

“So be it, my child!” returned the broken-spirited father, striving to shake off his depression and black presentiments. “So be it, my own Caterina! And now, darling, I must go to our good friend Beppo Fierli, to tell him to see Messer Giustino’s lawyer on our part.”

And Caterina was again left in complete solitude to meditate on the new life before her.

Thus was definitively settled the marriage of the loveliest girl in Florence—for such all the old chroniclers, who have recorded these facts, agree in declaring her to have been—in her sixteenth

year, with a dirty, disagreeable, mean-minded old man, aged enough to be her grandfather. And Heaven was called on to bless the union; and the parties to the monstrous bargain hoped that good would come to them of it; and Caterina went to her new home honestly meaning "to do her duty" by her husband.

CHAPTER II.

A FLORENTINE HOME IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

So Messer Giustino Canacci—or *dei* Canacci—for it would seem from some of the chronicles that he was entitled to the “particle noble,” which indicated his patrician birth and quality—Messer Giustino dei Canacci bought his lovely young wife dirt cheap, in consequence of the hardness of the times, and the depression of the market for that as for other articles. And pretty Caterina Bassi, who, as her father said, with perfect truth, had for sixteen years been as good a girl and dutiful a daughter as parents could wish to have, the stay of their age and the sunshine of their house—pretty innocent Caterina went to her new home very thoughtfully, purposing, as she said, “to do her duty” by her septuagenarian husband.

What precisely was her idea of this duty to be done, it might probably be somewhat difficult to investigate. It, of course, was the result of the teaching, avowed and unavowed, conscious and un-

conscious, which she had received from the religious theories and the social practices in vogue around her. This much, however, is at all events clear, that according to Nature's view of the matter, poor Caterina might as well have undertaken to do her duty as Emperor of China. What could have been her duty in the matter, unless to every proposition of such marriage to oppose utter and unbending refusal? "No! It is in flagrant opposition to the supreme law, the clearest, most indubitable, most unchangeable law of God! Ever no! Death rather!" But how could the performance of any such duty as this be expected from a poor little sixteen year-old subject of Ferdinando de' Medici, and docile daughter of Mother Church? A loveless marriage is a sin against nature, fatal, irremedial, from which no good, but evil only and further sin, can arise—on which no blessing can be hoped—a sin excusable by no conceivable circumstances—justifiable by no plea whatsoever of antagonistic or antecedent obligations. But if, strange as it is, this eternal truth is not invariably recognised, and universally acted on even in enlightened nineteenth-century England, what could be expected from seventeenth-century Catholic Florence! And the worst of it is, that the moral government of this world is like the law that governs a long arithmetical operation. One figure wrong in the top line, and your whole sum comes

out hopelessly wrong in every part. Actions *will* produce their proper necessary and ordained consequences. A wrong step, moralists constantly tell us, ever increases the difficulty of stepping aright afterwards. But it is the special penalty attached to some false steps, that they render a perfectly upright walk for the future impossible. An error has come into the calculation. The sum cannot thenceforward be worked correctly.

So Caterina went to the decent and respectable old family house of the Canacci in the Via dei Pilastri, to do her unnatural and impossible duty.

Old Giustino, on his part, seems to have performed the conditions under which he effected his purchase. The brutal drunkard, Bartolommeo, ceased to be an inmate of the house, though his occasional visits continued to be a source of trouble to Caterina; but not more, or perhaps so much so, as to the old man himself. The "safe and assured bed and board" had been duly forthcoming. The mid-day meal and the evening supper followed each other with the most monotonously regular certainty; and there were no anxieties on this score for the morrow. In prospect this had appeared to the ruined artisan's daughter in her naked home, to be well-nigh all that was needed for happiness on earth. The hopes and aspirations of the storm-tossed seamen in imminent danger of wreck, limit themselves to the safety and repose of the harbour.

And for a while the security of the asylum she had reached seemed to fill in the fruition of it all the space in her mind which it had occupied when looked forward to from amid the risks and perils of her previous position; the more so that she had found herself able, in one way or another, to afford some assistance to her father.

The dead solitude, too, in which she lived in Casa Canacci, and the strictly home-keeping habits, which fell in with Signor Giustino's ways and wishes, appeared in those early days of her married life to add to the grateful sense of security by shutting out all those miserable sights and sounds and dangers with which the plague-stricken city was rife.

The only source of interest, moreover, which remained to her outside the doors of her home, was very shortly taken from her. For poor Pasquale Bassi was stricken by the pestilence in the last days of its virulence, and followed, as he said he should, his wife and son to the grave.

Thus Caterina was left alone in the world with her aged husband.

And by the spring of the next year the plague had ceased. The Misericordia bell was no longer heard booming its sinister call over the city almost every hour of the day and night. Valdarno and its enclosing hills were once more bright and smiling with the promise of abundant corn, wine, and

oil. The extreme pressure of scarcity decreased gradually ; and the Florentines made haste to forget the black days through which they had passed.

But all this brought no change to the monotonous dreamy life of the inmates of the still old house in the Via dei Pilastri. There the noontide meal and the evening meal still followed each other with imperturbable regularity, and the morning and the evening made up each uneventful day, unvaried save by the Sunday and Feast-day visits to the neighbouring church of Sant' Ambrogio. And Caterina, having left a year behind her the anxieties, the privations, and the labour of her maiden life, was now in her seventeenth year, though somewhat paled, like a flower shut from the sunlight, more beautiful than ever.

But unfailing succession of dinners and suppers, even though the prospect of such be stretched out with unbroken continuity into the future, will not—so perversely constituted is the human heart—suffice to ensure happiness or even placid contentment. Especially they fail to do so to a heart and mind of just seventeen years' experience of life. It was in vain that Caterina, marvelling at the change that was creeping over her, strove to call back her imagination to the days when such tranquil security as that of her present life appeared to her a haven of rest, beyond which she had nothing to ask of fate. In vain she taxed herself with capricious

fickleness, and questioned her heart as to the causes of the change. She could not understand it. But the fact was there. An unspeakable weariness seemed to extend itself from day to day, like a spreading dry-rot, over her life. It all seemed empty. There was a feeling of a great craving void in her heart, craving unmistakably ; but craving for what ? She spent dull idle hours in wearily thinking over the question, and found no answer to it.

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Thus much of the story to be told may be authentically gathered out of the chronicles, which have preserved for us this specimen bit, cut out from the life of the seventeenth century. At this point the slide is suddenly withdrawn from the magic lantern ; the light is put out ; and the house in the Via dei Pilastri, with its inmates, vanish into darkness. The next slide projects on the magic circumscribed circle of light, a scene some four years later in date. There would be very little difficulty in filling up the chasm between the two periods with very satisfactory assurance of truthfulness. But as the reader can do this for himself quite as well as the writer could do it for him, and as it is intended to present here only what is warranted by the record, the raree-show shall reopen with the spring of 1638.

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Five years have elapsed since we left Caterina, in her seventeenth year, "doing her duty" to her husband, then in his seventieth. She is now twenty-two and he seventy-five—and the wifely duty has become somewhat simplified. For, five years beyond the threescore and ten make deep marks in their passage.

It was the third hour of the night, as the old chroniclers have it, reckoning after the Italian manner—not yet abandoned in remote parts of the country—from sundown, which was called "the twenty-four"—the third hour of the night in Casa Canacci, which at that season of the year must have been about ten o'clock. The mistress of the house was in a sitting-room on the ground floor, at the back of it, looking into a very small garden; and was occupied, assisted by a neat and pretty maid-servant, some five or six years older than herself, in preparing a table for supper.

The five years, which had sped Ser Giustino so rapidly onward in his down-hill path, had apparently done little or nothing towards advancing his beautiful wife on her way to the top of it. She was, if anything, more lovely than ever. Something, perhaps, may have been due to the style of her attire, which was strikingly different from what it had been in the first years of her married life. It had then been almost monastic in its unadorned simplicity. Now, without making any pretence to

the splendour which was then in vogue among the noble and wealthy, it was entirely modish in fashion, and worn with that provocative grace which is the prerogative of those women only who, in the envious language of those ungifted with it, "lay themselves out for admiration." Somewhat also of increased charm may have been attributable to a very evident change of mind, and consequent change of manner. The old dull listlessness was gone. The heavy vacant eye had acquired brightness and animation. The languid weary-seeming step had become brisk and alert. All the old passivity and apathetic sense of the emptiness of life had vanished. Something had evidently come into the circle of her life which had given it an interest and zest of some sort. Yet any observer, whose attention had been sharpened by a real interest in the young wife's welfare, would hardly have been satisfied with her manner and bearing. Hers was not the air that speaks of tranquil happiness and well-assured contentment. The bright eye was too brilliant. Was there the fever of excitement in it? The alert step was too alert. Did its movements perchance indicate nervous exaltation? At all events, the ever-beautiful Caterina was greatly changed.

"There goes the hour!" she said to her attendant, as they both were busying themselves about

the table. "What o'clock was it, Nina, when you gave the Padrone his broth?"

"Oh! more than an hour ago," replied the pretty Abigail; "I gave it him nearly half an hour before the time, to make sure. He never keeps awake long after taking it."

"It was well thought of. But, Nina, run up and see if he is asleep. You can tread so that a condemned man listening for the step of the *bar-gello* to take him to the block would not hear you. Creep to the bedside, and see that he is really asleep."

"That I can do, signora! But, Holy Virgin! how you trouble yourself about nothing. As if anything could be heard from this room to the room upstairs looking to the street, and the roof over us a solid arch, too!"

"From this room, perhaps not; but I am afraid of the front door, just under his windows. I would not that he should be disturbed! . . . Run up, Nina, there's a good girl!"

"Disturb him! Oh! not for the world!" said Nina, with half a tone of sneer in her voice, as she glanced with a look of intelligence to her mistress, from whom it obtained no response. And she tripped off on her errand as she spoke.

Caterina, who seemed unable to remain still for a moment, turned to a glass that stood above a

console-table at one side of the room, as soon as the maid was gone, and employed herself in bestowing some of those little improving touches on her hair and dress, which women appear never to consider superfluous.

“All right, signora!” cried Nina, with a toss of her pretty head, as she returned to the supper-room; “he is sleeping like a baby in a cradle, and there is no need to think about him any more till to-morrow morning, thank the saints!”

“That is well,” said the young wife; but she gave a little sigh as she said it. Then, as she moved round the table for the hundredth time, she went on: “But what is this, Nina mia? These are the second-best napkins. I wanted to have the Holland damask to-night.”

“I am sure those are good enough for their highnesses,” said Nina; “and they are what you have always used, signora.”

“Ah! But, Nina, I expect a different sort of guest to-night—you know who. And don’t you know that he must always have been used to much richer plenishing than anything I can put before him? Run, quick, and get out the damask napkins.”

Just as she said this, three gentle but distinct taps on the glass of a window by the side of the front door of the house were heard. Both women gave a little start, and the blood mantled high in

Caterina's cheeks and forehead, and then as suddenly retreated to her heart.

"There they are!" cried Nina, hastily going with cat-like pace to the door, and taking as she went an oil-cruise in her hand, which stood on a side-board near the door of the room. Before opening she poured a drop or two on both hinges of the great door and on the lock, and was thus enabled to admit those who had knocked without the slightest noise.

They were two young men, patricians evidently, by the rapiers at their side, but not, as far as could be judged by their appearance, of those who formed the gay and youthful circle that surrounded the young grand-duke. One was Signor Jacopo Serselli, and the other Signor Vincenzo Carlini.

Both were, at the period of their visit to Caterina, young men of some twenty-five years old, or thereaway.

As they came in, followed by Nina, with the oil-cruise in her hand, Caterina was again standing before the glass on the console.

"What a treasure you have in our friend little Nina here, Signora Caterina!" said Serselli, as he stepped up to the lady, and kissed her hand. "A lout of a serving-man would have taken the key to open the door. La Nina understands matters better. She takes the oil-flask."

"And talking of that, lady fair," said Carlini,

in his turn kissing the lady's hand, "how is his worship? He sleeps well o' nights, I hope?"

"Better than you will, I doubt, scapegrace as you are, if you ever come to be his age, which is hardly to be thought," said Caterina, smilingly, shaking a slender rosy forefinger at him. "Ser Giustino has no remembrances that should keep him from sleeping."

"Oh, of course not! One understands all that. Youth is a new invention of the fiend. There were no young men, and especially no young women, in Ser Giustino's day. And when we have played out our playtime, we shall shake our frosty old heads at the youngsters, and wonder at the wickedness of the age. But sound sleeping is a most valuable quality in an old man, and especially in an old husband, as some think. And then, as Serselli says, Nina is such a treasure!—an invaluable nurse! If the unblemished conscience of the admirable Ser Giustino should fail to procure him that profound repose which is so necessary at his time of life—to all parties concerned—Nina could at need show herself mistress of higher flights than that trick of oiling a rusty hinge, or I am mistaken."

"What on earth do you mean, Signor Vincenzo?" said Caterina, really puzzled; "and how do you know anything about La Nina's capabilities?"

"Aha! carissima Signora mia!" returned

Carlini ; “perhaps I knew La Baffi before you did.”

A transient cloud passed over the still girlish brow of the young wife, corresponding to an equally transient shade of doubt in her mind, which had not time, however, to assume the full consistency of suspicion before it was chased by the stronger interest that was occupying her thoughts.

For some time past, as may easily be gathered from the facts with which the reader has become acquainted, La Signora Canacci had entered on a manner of life which, to say the least, might have been deemed dangerous, and which necessitated the practice of deception on her husband. But as yet the extent of her departure from the good resolutions with which she had started on her path of married life had not exceeded this entertaining of cavaliers, without her husband’s knowledge. Nor, although abundance of what most of the Florentine beauties, her contemporaries, might have called “temptation,” had been thrown in her path, had she hitherto been visited by any feeling calculated to lead her into more serious dereliction of her duty. But the Carnival, that season which seems carefully to have been arranged for the purpose of providing occasion for lenten penitence, was just over ; and in the course of those festivities and amusements, which still in some measure, but

in the days of which we are speaking to a much greater degree, brought the different classes of Florentine society together, Caterina had more than once danced with perhaps the most "dangerous" man in Florence, the splendid and handsome Jacopo Salviati, Duke of San Giuliano.

The pleasure-seeking duke had been at once smitten with the truly surpassing beauty of Caterina, and had of course found little difficulty in obtaining the promise of a presentation to her from some one of those who were in the habit of frequenting her house.

This presentation was to take place on the evening of which we have been speaking; and Salviati was to make his first visit to the house in the Via dei Pilastri.

"What was the hour you named to the duke, Ser Vincenzo, as that of our little supper?" asked Caterina.

"Half-past ten, French time, I told him," replied Carlini; "and you may depend on Salviati's gallantry to bring him to your door punctually at that hour. And now, by your leave, fair lady, I will go to the door, and wait for his excellency, that there may be no mistake about the house, and no noise about letting him in."

Signor Carlini had not to do duty as porter at the door very long. The Duca de Salviati was, as his friend had prophesied, as punctual to his

appointment as ever languishing lover was. Caterina and Signor Serselli had been left together but a very few minutes when Carlini returned, ushering into the modestly appointed supper-room, with every manifestation of the most exaggerated obsequiousness, a very splendid-looking cavalier.

The age to which this history belongs was one specially marked by gorgeousness of personal adornment and equipment. In no part of Europe was extravagance in this respect carried to a greater height than in the capital of the wealthy and ostentatiously magnificent Medicean dukes. And at the court of the young and pleasure-loving Ferdinand the Second there was no man who could vie in nobility of birth, in wealth, in personal advantages, and in magnificence, with Jacopo Salviati, Duke of San Giuliano. A favourite with the young sovereign, whose senior he was by but a year or two, he was the soul of the court, the leading spirit in every revel, the model on which the rising generation strove to form themselves, and the loadstar of most of the brightest eyes in Florence.

Salviati, when duly presented to Caterina, accosted her as he would have done the noblest lady of the court. Far from falling in with that free-and-easy, half mock-ceremonious, half-bantering tone, which Serselli and Carlini permitted themselves towards her, his manner was courtly and

respectful, though it made no attempt whatever to hide his very unmistakable admiration for his beautiful hostess. During supper he exerted himself to shine before her. The little party remained at table far into the night. And Caterina thought that she had never till now known the pleasure of social intercourse, or seen a man really worthy of a woman's love.

From that night Jacopo Salviati became a very frequent visitor at the quiet respectable house in the Via dei Pilastri. The ladies of the court complained that Salviati was not like himself of late; he was quite a changed man. And, in truth, he was so—as far as an engrossing passion can change a man.

Caterina, too, was a changed woman. The old feeling of the utter emptiness of all things returned, with the difference that it was confined to the hours when Salviati was not there. All the interest and vitality of her life were concentrated into the hours of his almost nightly visits. She loved for the first time; and now for the first time her marriage with Ser Giustino, and more still, the consequence of her recent life, seemed monstrous; and she marvelled in all sincerity how such things had been possible to her.

And as the summer drew on, and the duke was less frequently obliged to show himself at court, it was rarely that he did not tap at the now well-

known window at the usual hour. But these nightly visits were made with every precaution for securing secrecy that could be imagined. Ser Giustino, under Nina's careful nursing, always slept with admirable regularity; and the lovers dared to think that they were happy in each other's love.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER FLORENTINE HOME.

THE Villa Salviati, still universally called by that name, though many years ago it passed into the hands of the wealthy Borghesi (who sold it to the present Lord Bexley, by whom it was again sold, on his ceasing to reside at Florence, to Signor Mario), is one of the most conspicuous and the best known of the thousand villas that stud the olive-covered hills of the Valdarno around the "City of Flowers." It stands on the lowest spur of the Apennines, some two or three miles from the city, to the north, between the great Bologna road and the little stream of the Mugnone. In its outward aspect, the Villa Salviati, backed against its aged cypress grove, has more of a mediæval castellated appearance than perhaps any other of the Florentine villas. And its general appearance is very little, if at all, changed from that which it wore when it was inhabited by Duke Jacopo and the Duchess Veronica.

That lady was, as the daughter of a sovereign

prince, superior in rank to any other of those who composed the court of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. She was the daughter of Prince Carlo Cybo, the reigning sovereign of the little dominion of Massa and Carrara : a mountainous and exceedingly beautiful tract of coast and Apennine, between the frontier of the Genoese republic and that of Lucca. The name of Salviati fills a nobler space in the page of history than that of Cybo, notwithstanding its pope and dozens of cardinals of the name; and its little morsel of rocky principality. But the Salviati greatnesses had been of the civic, not the dynastic kind, and had been achieved in the old days, when citizens counted for more and princelings for less, in Italy. And the Salviatis had been sinking in the latter generations into the subjects of a despot, while the Cybos had been rising into being despots themselves. Jacopo Salviati, therefore, wealthy, young, brilliant, admired, and Duca di San Giuliano into the bargain as he was, was considered to have "made a great match" when he married the Lady Veronica Cybo.

But "great matches" are advantages which generally have to be paid for at a very heavy rate. We have had a peep at the interior of one Florentine home, which assuredly did not appear to possess any of the elements of a happy home. Yet there also, had there been a "great match," for such, of course, the marriage of the ruin-stricken

dyer's daughter with the comfortably-circumstanced patrician, Signor Canacci, must be considered to have been. Some excuse poor Caterina had for saying yes, when she should have at all hazards said no. For, want of bread is as irresistible as dangerous a counsellor. Yet her fate could hardly, even as to such matters as meet the eye, have been worse had she refused Signor Canacci, than it was after she accepted him.

In that other Florentine home, which we have now to enter, it might have seemed that Fortune had been lavish of everything that could, as far as she was concerned, make the life of its inmates happy. There were youth, health, wealth, a noble name, a brilliant position, troops of friends. Yet "a great match," there also, ruined all. Jacopo Salviati was assuredly infinitely less to be pitied for the fate he made for himself, than poor Caterina. How crawlingly mean an ambition must it have been, that could have induced a man so circumstanced to wed a woman he could never love, for the sake of "a great match" with a "princess of a reigning house."

The Lady Veronica Cybo was that most unfortunate and pitiable of all God's creatures—a woman neither to the eye nor to the mind lovely. She had not the gift of beauty; nor had she, in compensation for the deficiency, that spiritual beauty of heart and mind and temper, which has often

availed to win affection as passionate as, and more durable than, the conquests of unaided beauty. Infinitely fortunate for [her, and proportionably disastrous for the other party to any such bargain, would it have been, if she could have changed her fate and her identity with the poorest, black-eyed, cherry-cheeked, smiling-hearted lass, who struggled hard for a modicum of chestnuts, sufficient to keep body and soul together, on the mountains of which her father was sovereign.

There does not appear on the face of the record any reason for supposing that this unfortunate princess was in any way a worse woman than her peers of that day and country. In one respect she was unquestionably better than the great majority of them. She sought for no love save that of her husband. Of course the light-o'-love dames, who hated her, would have said that there was small virtue in not seeking that which was equally unattainable to her at any price, from either husband or lover.

But the Lady Veronica did very earnestly and passionately desire the love of her husband. Poor hapless woman! The bitterest cup that has ever been mixed for human lips is surely that which has to be drained by those in whom a fatal incapacity for winning love is combined with a heart ardently athirst for it. Can it be wondered at, that, under the infliction of such torture, the moody brow

becomes darker, the acrid temper more aggressive, the unlightsome spirits more gloomy? The jealousy, transmuting by its own odious chemistry love to hate, and seeking to inflict some portion at least of its own torments on the cause of them, comes to distort the view, to harden the heart, to exasperate the mind. And the unlovely and unloved wife, maddened with these scorpion stings, becomes absolutely hateful—a torment and a blister to the man whose love she would give her heart's blood to conciliate.

Thus the great match, which the head of the House of Salviati had made, had the effect of fatally and finally banishing domestic peace and happiness from his heart. But the heaviest weight of the penalty, by very far, fell on the party unsinning in the matter. The duke, who had never loved the woman he had made his wife, went his own way, heart-whole at least, if not blest; sought and found such pleasures as to his taste best supplied the place of happiness; kept out of his wife's way as much as he could; deceived her for comparative peace' sake, when it was possible to do so, and received with careless recklessness the storm of her lamentations and reproaches on shoulders weather-proof against such pelting, when it was not possible.

But the Duca di San Giuliano had become a changed man, as has been said. Not that the new passion which engrossed him rendered him a less

assiduous or less admired frequenter of the court. Jacopo Salviati was still the most brilliant guest, and the most magnificent host in Florence. But the ladies found that he was changed. All that ready abundance of homage which, assorted in portions ranging in amount from an exchange of glances to a profession of eternal devotion, had formed a sort of competitive prize-fund for the emulation of the fair frail dames of the courtly circle, suddenly vanished. Bright eyes languished and obtained no responsive glances; slender fingers lingered in search of an expressive pressure, and no pressure was forthcoming; soft sighs made the lace tremulous on snowy bosoms, but the peerless duke, so susceptible a few short months ago to such appeals to his sensibility, seemed now invulnerable as adamant. The sad phenomenon was discussed amid quivering fans and rustling silks, in the sacred privacy of many a carefully-closed boudoir. And each Marchesa Giulia or Contessa Diamante had some gentle pity to bestow on some rival contessa or marchesa of the set, who was supposed to be more specially touched to the quick by this deplorable and unaccountable defection of the most gay and gallant cavalier in Tuscany.

What could have come over the noble Salviati? What was the meaning of it? Could it be a ridiculously premature and altogether abnormal fit of devotion? There were such cases on record. But

the whole tenor of the duke's life and bearing seemed to scout so preposterous an idea. Salviati was as gay as—nay, if anything, gayer than—ever. His laugh was as ready and as joyous as it had ever been, his gait as light, his smile as frank and radiant. Still, there was one circumstance which, to some of the younger of the fair bevy of dames in council, seemed to afford just grounds of suspicion that the mischief might be of this nature. La Baronessa Dianora had learned from her maid, who was particularly intimate with one of the duke's own men, that his master had recently become a member of one of the religious lay confraternities, which existed in great numbers at that time. The fact of such membership was not in any case much known or spoken of. For, it was one of the rules of these societies that no man should disclose to any one not belonging to the confraternity the fact of his enrolment in it. The evidence, however, in the present instance seemed good, and the less experienced of the debaters were inclined to attach much weight to the circumstance. Those who had been longer married, however, altogether pooh-poohed it. "Oh yes! The discipline companies!" said they. "We know what that means. Why do they meet always at night? That may do for his wife, the duchess, but not for us. I think I see Jacopo offering his shoulders to the scourge in the hand of some fat citizen, sweating his sins of false

weights and clipped coin off his conscience ! No, no ! If Salviati is a member of one of those very convenient companies, you may be sure religion has nothing to do with the matter."

Upon the whole, the idea that the duke could have fallen into religion a good thirty years before his time was dismissed as too preposterous.

Could it be witchcraft ? Ay ! that, indeed, was a more probable solution of the mystery. There were not wanting among their own set those who assuredly would have the wish, and were much suspected of possessing the science, necessary for the ministering of a love-philtre to so generally coveted a prize. The Duchess Veronica herself ? Ah ! What more likely ! The duchess, though she habitually received with magnificent hospitality all the select society of Florence, and frequently appeared, as her rank required, at the court, yet was not on such intimate terms with the generality of the Florentine ladies as to be considered one of themselves. This was in part caused by the pre-eminence of her rank ; for she was the daughter of a sovereign prince—and partly by a natural reserve and seriousness of character, which indisposed her for mixing on equal terms with so very light and frivolous a society. The Duchess Veronica, moreover, was not a happy woman, and she shrank from the gay crowd, who were utterly incapable of sympathising with her sorrows, as a stricken

deer slinks away from the herd. That a wife, and one of some seven or eight years' standing too, should be made seriously unhappy by a husband's infidelities appeared so ridiculous, indeed so inconceivable, that, though many a sneer was levelled at pretensions so absurd, the greater number of her female critics believed that such conduct was but a very needlessly hypocritical mask adopted for the concealment of her own irregularities. In short, the Duchess Veronica was as unpopular in the gay world of Florence as the duke was the reverse. And it was at once agreed, *nem. con.*, that there was a considerable degree of antecedent probability that the duke's inexplicable insensibility to attractions which once had been powerful over him, was due to unfair tampering with the black art; and a peculiarly disgusting feature was added to the atrocity by the fact, that his own wife was the person most open to suspicion of having thus endeavoured to monopolise him.

But then, again, as it was logically urged by one deeply meditating fair one, if the Lady Veronica had been practising in this manner, it followed from the facts of the case that she had been successful in her schemes. If so, things must now be going on very differently in that noble home from what they had all had opportunities—too many, indeed, as they declared with unanimous shrugs of white shoulders, and shaking of ambrosial top-knots—of

observing before now. And the duchess would probably have been observed to clear her moody brow, and cease those absurd and ludicrous manifestations of jealousy, which made her a ridicule and really a disgrace, my dears, to society. Could any one say whether any such changes had been observed? And forthwith was elicited abundant testimony to the contrary. It was declared on all hands that the Duchess Veronica was more unbearable with her black humours and gloominess than ever. The Principessa Olympia had been at the palazzo after the passeggiata only yester evening: "And when il povero Jacopo called for his hat and gloves, and merely said to the man that he should not sup at home, you should have seen the scowl on her ladyship's face!"

"Indeed, I wonder that he ever goes home at all, for my part," said the Contessa Giacinta, who had recently been married to a man old enough to be her grandfather; I am sure I should not, in his place."

And then came a whole chorus of pity for so unhappy a husband, and of indignant vituperation on so unreasonable and disagreeable a wife. But the mystery of the sad change in Salviati remained as dark as ever.

Upon one occasion, towards the end of October, in the year 1638, a good deal of conversation of the above described sort had passed among a knot of

noble ladies assembled at the house of one of the party. The Contessa Cecilia Neri, who had taken but little active part in it, although it was supposed that she felt an especial interest in the subject (and her fair friends had accordingly been in a great degree talking at her), but who had none the less been an attentive listener to all that had been said, returned home determined at once to put into execution a plan which had occurred to her for arriving at the real truth of the matter. This lady was still unquestionably one of the most beautiful, though no longer one of the youngest, of the party; and it was generally understood that her career had been by no means a tame or uneventful one.

Immediately on reaching the solitude of her own chamber, she wrote, and forthwith despatched, the following note:—

“ My most valued friend, I am sure that for the sake of old times—pleasanter times they were, dear friend, than any I have seen since, I trow—you will be pleased with the opportunity of doing me a little service. There is no question of either difficulty or danger. I simply wish to know something that I am sure you can tell me, or, at all events, can find out for me. If I am not wrong in flattering myself that the occasion will be not disagreeable to you, be, at an hour after the Ave Maria to-morrow evening,

at the little door in the side alley to the left of the palazzo. I do not think you can have forgotten the way to it.

“Yours, as sincerely as ever, if you will,

“CECILIA.”

(Superscribed)—“To the most Illustrious Cavalier, the Signore Vincenzo Carlini.”

This missive brought our acquaintance of the Via dei Pilastri to the little side-door in the alley between the Palazzo Neri and the next house to it, punctually at the hour named. He had forgotten neither the unobtrusive little door, nor the dark narrow stair within it communicating directly with the lady's bower, and with no other part of the house—a remarkable architectural arrangement still to be seen in existence in some of the noble homes in Florence. In fact, it was the only part of the mansion with which the Cavalier Carlini was acquainted. Though of patrician birth, he was not of those who composed the inner circle which revolved immediately around the grand-ducal centre. And from the time that the intimacy which occasioned his visits to the postern had ceased, he had never either seen the interior of the Palazzo Neri, or spoken with its mistress. Now, as he betook himself to obey her summons, his meditations were more occupied with the terms in which the contessa's

note was subscribed, than with the other contents of it; and he reflected on them more with reference to that clinking of the bucket at the bottom of the well, of which he had spoken to Caterina Canacci, than in any point of view more flattering to the still beautiful Contessa Cecilia. The lady, on her side, was bent only on obtaining the information of which she was in search, and provided she got it, cared comparatively little what price she paid for it, in whatever kind of coin might be most acceptable to her old acquaintance.

Under these circumstances they were not long in understanding each other.

“Stuff and nonsense, my good friend!” replied the lady, to a declaration of Carlini, that he really could throw no light on the matter, but would endeavour to obtain the required information—for the fact was, that he was anxious to gain time to think the business over a little before betraying a secret without knowing what use it was to be made to serve—“stuff and nonsense, my good friend! You can tell me what I want to know this instant, if you will. Don’t I know that you and the duke hunt in couples? Ah? you think that we women know nothing of the proceedings of our lords and masters outside their own palace doors. Pooh! pooh! Jacopo Salviati has some love affair on his hands which utterly absorbs him; some passion which has taken hold of him in good earnest. I

want to know who is the object of it. A mere caprice! a curious whim! But I will know, and I am quite sure that you can tell me."

"I think I can undertake to say," returned Carlini, "that Salviati has formed no attachment to any lady of your world. If there is anything of the sort, it must be a mere caprice for some pretty face in quite another class."

"Thank you for nothing, my most prudent Vincenzo. I could have told you as much as that. If anybody of our world was in question, I need not have asked you for information. I am very sure that it is some mere nobody; but I have reasons for choosing to know who this nobody is. Will you tell me; or must I find out from somebody else?"

"But, Signora mia, pardon me if I ask for what purpose the Contessa Cecilia dei Neri can possibly want to know the particulars of vulgar loves, that can in no wise have any interest for the world in which she lives?"

"Vulgar loves! Cospetto! When such a man as the Duca di San Giuliano——"

"Why, carissima mia Signora, dukes will have their amusements like more vulgar mortals. Is it to your ladyship that one has to confess the fact?"

"Amusements! but I tell you Salviati is utterly absorbed by this new passion. He is lost, extinguished in his own sphere. Nothing but a veritable

passion could have changed the man so totally as he is changed."

"Why; your ladyship knows how Salviati is situated at home. You know what the Duchess Veronica is."

"We all know that, I think, pretty well; but what in Heaven's name has the Duchess Veronica to do in the matter?"

"Why, gentilissima Signora Cecilia, the matter stands thus: if it were, perchance, the case that any one of your ladyship's friends had any special interest in our noble friend Jacopo" — and he glanced archly at the lady as he spoke — "and if I could succeed in learning the whereabouts of this little bourgeoisie amourette, if amourette there be, why, all is fair in love! Our amiable Tuscan dames understand and practise the law of the gentle science in all courtesy and mutual good feeling, and there would be no harm done; but with the Duchess Veronica the case is different. She is not one of us Tuscans," he added, as his quick eye noted a slight curl on the lip of the lady; "still less is she one of you. If the knowledge of the duke's peccadilloes should come to her ears, you know real mischief might be the result; you would not make any such use as that of the information you are seeking?"

"Now, really, old friend, you ought to know me better than that," returned the Contessa; into whose

mind an idea had glided, rapid as the lightning flash, at the last words of Carlini. "The real truth is, then, that one of my friends, as you say"—and she returned the arch look of intelligence with which he had previously accompanied the same words—"has a certain amount of gentle interest in the state of Salviati's heart; but you don't think I am such a marplot, such a traitor in the camp, as to carry such tales to a man's wife, at all events to such a wife as that odious Veronica! As you truly say, she is no gentle Tuscan, neither one of us, nor tolerated by us. She is a black ugly blot on the surface of our gay and laughter-loving world, a proud, gloomy, jealous, bitter-minded, detestable woman! No, trust me, you will not find me, or any one of us, in the least inclined to fight the Duchess Veronica's battles."

"In that case, I think I shall be able to gratify your ladyship; but I am sure that the amabilissima Signora Cecilia will not have been offended, that I should have been cautious not to let trouble arise out of matters that ought never to pass out of the domain of light-hearted laugh and jest, and mutual toleration. Say I well?"

"Excellently well! most amiable of philosophers! And now, out with the secret! For I am very sure that you can tell it me on the spot, as well as a week hence."

"There is no deceiving your ladyship's practised

penetration!" said Carlini, with a profound inclination. "Here it is then. Salviati's flame, for the nonce, is a certain Signora Canacci, who lives in the Via dei Pilastri. The husband is some seventy or eighty years old, I believe. There has at least been no difficulty in the way to stimulate the noble duke's ardour in the chase."

"Ah! . . . that is it, is it! Methinks I have heard of that same Caterina Canacci. Of very low origin, was she not, much below the position of old Canacci, her husband; and something miraculously beautiful, I think I have heard, eh?"

"Well! a pretty face enough! a very pretty face! But what would you have! A mere doll! Neither expression, manner, nor grace! How should it be otherwise?"

"Now listen, Vincenzo mio! I have a fancy; . . . and you know perhaps that the shortest and easiest way to have done with my fancies—is to satisfy them. They are apt to become troublesome, . . . and sometimes even dangerous otherwise. I must have a portrait of this superlatively beautiful Caterina Canacci. And you must manage to get me one, somehow or other. It cannot be very difficult to a man of your resources."

"Peerless Signora Cecilia, I am delighted to have it in my power to satisfy you on that head with the greatest readiness. It so happens that

among a few other souvenirs of the same sort, I possess a portrait of the lady in question. In some cases, Signora Cecilia, the features of one who has been loved, remain so graven on the heart, that no painter's art is needed to make the memory of them eternal. But *La Caterina poveretta*! When one does not bring even a scar on the heart away to remember a love-passage by, why, a touch of the artist's craft may serve as a memorial of what otherwise would be wholly forgotten."

"Aha! friend Vincenzo! So you were beforehand in Casa Canacci with our poor friend Jacopo, eh?"

"Signora Contessa! The grandees of the court have an infinity of advantages over us poor simple cavalieri. But always to be first served at the shrine of beauty is not among the number, at least in Tuscany." The falseness of this boast the reader knows.

"Bravo! Signore Cavaliere Vincenzo! When shall I have the portrait?"

"Within an hour after I quit the gracious presence of your ladyship. Shall I return with it, and myself consign it to your fair hands?"

"Nay! that would be trespassing too much on your kindness. Let it be given in a sealed envelope to my maid—you won't have forgotten Geppina—she can be trusted, as you know; and it will be all well."

“Your ladyship shall be punctually served,” said Carlini, as he stooped to kiss the lady’s hand. “May I hope,” he added, rather hesitatingly, but looking into her eyes the while—“may I hope, that sometimes in the dull evenings between this and the beginning of Carnival, I may sometimes have the honour of an hour of your society?”

“To be sure! why not? my very good friend, Signore Vincenzo. Just at present, it is true, I am much occupied. But you shall hear from me. You may depend on hearing from me, as soon as I am able to permit myself the pleasure of a visit from you.”

Carlini bowed again and took his leave, perfectly well understanding that there was to be no renewal of the terms on which he and the Contessa Cecilia had once been together; and that the treacherous signature to her note had been merely a lure to obtain from him what she wanted. They were not blessings on the head of his old friend, which he invoked as he passed out of the little postern into the alley, and from that into the Via Maggio, which was the site of the Palazzo dei Neri. But it was no part of Signor Vincenzo Carlini’s philosophy to permit little disappointments of this nature to “pass,” as he had phrased it, “from the domain of smiles and laughter,” into the region of serious troubles and heart-burnings. More specially still, it was wholly contrary to his practice to quarrel

with those above him on the wheel of fortune. It appeared to him the same thing as quarrelling with his bread-and-butter, or, more absurdly still, with the chances of having butter on his bread. So the Lady Cecilia had Caterina's portrait in her hands within an hour from the time Signor Carlini left her.

When the Contessa Cecilia had first conceived the idea of making use of her old acquaintance, Vincenzo Carlini, for the purpose of finding out what was really at the bottom of the change which all the court circle had observed in the Duca di San Giuliano, she had merely been actuated by a woman's curiosity to know the person of her rival. She had listened to all the nonsense chattered by the ladies around her on the subject, without taking any part in their speculations, knowing right well, *pur troppo*—as she would have said in her own Tuscan—that some new and unusually absorbing passion was the real cause of Salviati's recent insensibility to all the agaceries that could be brought to bear upon him. Several of the “ornaments of the court” of Ferdinando the Second had been more or less piqued and irritated by this rebellion against legitimate authority; but the only heart that had really been hit hard by it was that of the Contessa Cecilia. She accordingly had been more clear-sighted than the rest, in divining the true state of the case.

The Duchess di San Giuliano, as has been said, was by no means popular among the light-hearted and light-mannered beauties of the Tuscan court. But, as will be readily imagined under the circumstances, she was especially the object of the Signora Cecilia's aversion. A reference to the best authorities on the nature and idiosyncrasy of the female heart, would lead to the further belief that that high-born lady did not feel kindly towards the unknown beauty whose low-born charms had so wrought on the noble duke. Further still, the recorded effects which have been observed with remarkable uniformity to follow the "*spretæ injuria formæ*," justify us in concluding, that it would not be displeasing to the neglected fair one to have visited with a certain amount of punishment the recreant knight himself.

Now, unfortunately, the word which Carlini had let fall about the mischief likely to follow from any communication of the facts of Salviati's infidelity, to the duchess, had suddenly suggested to the lovely and amiable Cecilia a method by which, as it seemed to her, she might succeed in killing three birds with one stone.

"Now for a sight of this redoubtable rival!" sneered the contessa in soliloquy; and she clutched the packet containing the miniature, and impatiently tore open the envelope. "Now we shall see what the dyer's daughter is like—a dyer's

daughter they say, whose sire and mother both died in the plague year! Why, what is the use of noble blood and gentle birth, if the dregs of the populace—born in squalor, and reared in misery—can rival us in all a woman cares to live for! Now for it!” and she opened the case of the little portrait.

“Bah!” she cried, after a long and earnest look, during which her handsome but haughty features had curled into a sneering smile. “Bah! is that all?” And taking a taper in her hand she approached the mirror on her toilette-table, and seating herself in front of it, scanned the two faces before her. The comparison seemed satisfactory to her.

“A pretty face!” she said. “Yes, certainly a pretty face—pink cheeks, white forehead, black eyebrows, deep-blue eyes, crimson lips! A very pretty bit of colouring! Contour, meaning, grace, expression, fire, passion—nothing. Bah! That won’t last long. But that it should have endured at all, merits, methinks, some little measure of punishment—a punishment which, I take it, will have the effect of bringing back our stray sheep to its proper fold! This pink and white doll shall be taught to seek her lovers among her fellows for the future. And yon proud duchess, with her kill-joy face, and insolently censorious ways, shall find that it would have been more for her happiness never to

have come to our bright Florence, to lord it over Tuscan dames."

With these thoughts in her heart, she sat down before a writing-table, and penned in large coarse characters, which perfectly masked her own handwriting, the following billet:—

"A true friend to the Duchessa di San Giuliano—perhaps the only one she has in this vile, dissolute court—sends her the inclosed miniature. It is the portrait of one Caterina Canacci, who lives in the palazzo of that name, in the Via dei Pilastri; an abandoned woman, who has so bewitched the noble Jacopo Salviati, that his days are passed in thinking only of her, and his nights in her company. Should any doubt of the truth of these facts remain in the mind of the duchess, she may with ease dispel them by acquiring certain evidence of the duke's frequent visits to the house indicated.

"(Subscribed) A CITIZEN AND LOYAL SUBJECT
"OF MASSA."

When she had completed the above note, and placed it in an envelope, together with the miniature, addressed to the duchess, at her Villa Salviati, she rang her hand-bell, and said to Geppina, when she answered it:

"Let one of your own friends, Geppina, some one you can depend on, and who is not known in

any way as belonging to this house, take this packet to Villa Salviati, leave it, and come away without waiting to be asked any questions. And take care he speaks no word, either before or afterwards, of his errand."

The packet was at Villa Salviati the following morning before the duchess was up; and how it was placed in her hands as she sat at her morning toilette shall next be told.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PORTRAIT.

ON the morning after the interview between the Contessa Cecilia and Signor Carlini, the duchess was sitting in her chamber, while two lady's-maids were assisting her in the various operations of the toilette. A seat in front of a mirror is a position conducive to good humour and a pleasant state of mind in the case of many a woman. With the Lady Veronica it was not so. She was about twenty-six years old at that period, and already time and suffering had done their defacing work on the never-comely features. The looking-glass offered no consoling picture to the unhappy duchess. She was just then particularly sore at the duke having joined one of the far-famed companies of flagellants.

It is an historical fact that Salviati made himself a member of one of these bodies, whose place of meeting was conveniently near Caterina's house, in the Via dei Pilastri. They were popularly called "buche"-holes, or dens, that is, and especially

about the time at which the events here related took place, they played a very conspicuous part in the social life of the period and its irregularities. They took their origin from the well-known mediæval madness of the flagellants; and mutual "discipline" was the real object of the meetings in their earlier day. They always met by night, and professed to pass the whole of the vigils of the Church in devotion. This specialty of their rules made membership of them so extremely convenient a portion of the social life and manners of the seventeenth century that the number of societies of this nature, which had been seventy-five in the year 1527, had increased to the extraordinary number of one hundred and forty-nine in Florence alone! They were finally suppressed at the extinction of the Medicean dynasty.

Among all the members of the hundred and forty-nine confraternities, it must be supposed that some, at least, proposed to themselves, if not a literal compliance with the original "discipline" of the institution, at all events some sort of practice, such as probably the recitation of interminable litanies, which was, according to the ideas of that day, deemed to possess prophylactic virtues against the spiritual consequences of sinful lives. But very few persons in Florence could have been persuaded to believe that the gay and pleasure-loving young Duke of San Giuliano was among these. Least of

all would it have been possible to induce his own wife to attach a moment's faith to anything of the sort. That the duke was really enrolled on the list of one of these brotherhoods was likely enough; that he even presented himself at the place of meeting, and was noted as so present, was very possible; that he might have pushed his regard for appearances so far even as to have been seen at the end of the pious mummeries, divesting himself of the sort of white domino and hood worn by the members, was also possible. But who could know what had become of the figure thus masked, during the many intervening hours, save the faithful Luigi? And that nothing was to be gained by interrogating *him* either personally, if she could have condescended to do so, or indirectly, by means of her serving-women, the Lady Veronica well knew.

The practice of disguising themselves which was adopted by all these confraternities, ostensibly that their good deeds might not be seen of men, was one of the circumstances which made enrolment among them invaluable to those who had matters of any sort on hand which required concealment. It would seem as if nothing had been neglected by which these professedly religious institutions could be made perfectly adapted to every purpose of social disorder and vice. The long white gown reaching to the heels, and the capacious hood, with

its two holes for the eyes, descending below the shoulders, formed a disguise which set at defiance all possibility of recognition. The well-known costume was far too common to excite either surprise or remark, let it be seen where it might; and was, of course, equally available and equally convenient for the libertine whose object was another man's wife, as for the street-thief whose aim was another man's pocket-handkerchief; for the gallant bent on scaling a nunnery wall, or the burglar intent on breaking into a dwelling-house; for the abduction of a damsel, or the murder of a rival.

The sombre humour and never-sleeping jealousy of the Duchess Veronica were, as may easily be imagined, not a little deepened and exacerbated by the new and sudden fit of devotion which had shown itself by leading her lord to enrol himself a member of the "*Buca di San Antonio*," in the *Borgo Pinti*. Her imagination pictured to her the perfectly disguised white figure, unobtrusively attended by the trusty Luigi, gliding out from the assembled congregation, and betaking himself—whither?—to spend the intervening hours before stealing back in the morning's dawn to leave his gown and hood at the "*buca*," and starting thence for his deserted home. Where were those long hours spent?

"Have you learned from Luigi at what hour his master returned home last night, or this morning

rather, Francesca?" she asked of the maid, who was arranging her thin and scanty hair.

"It wanted some three hours to dawn, my lady, old Bindo, the porter, says when he opened the door for his excellency. Luigi is heavy-headed with his night watch, and is yet a-bed, being sure that his excellency will not yet need his attendance. The pious brotherhood, my lady, which my lord has lately joined, do prolong their saintly exercises, Luigi says, beyond all reason, begging your ladyship's pardon. He says, saving your ladyship's presence, that if godliness keeps such hours, he had rather have any master than a devout one."

"Know you where the confraternity, whose devotions my lord attends, holds its meetings?" demanded the duchess, frowning heavily.

"In Borgo Pinti, my lady, near the Church of Sant' Ambrogio. It is under the invocation of the holy hermit St. Anthony. They do say, my lady, that the thongs of the 'disciplines' are stiff with blood by the time they give over their holy exercises."

"Silly tales for such silly women as you, Francesca. Tell Luigi, when he next fools you with any such stories, that you know better than to believe him."

The Duchess Veronica felt an uncontrollable desire to know more. Who was the woman for whose love the proud and pleasure-loving Salviati could submit

to association with a rabble of absurd or hypocritical devotees, and to participation in their mummeries? The unhappy lady, brooding gloomily and bitterly, was pondering, as she sat listlessly before her glass, on the possibility of making this discovery, when the packet, despatched overnight by the Contessa Cecilia, was brought into her chamber, and placed in her hands by one of her tire-women.

“A packet, my lady, which was left early this morning, before any of your ladyship’s women were up. Porter Bindo has just given it to me. The bearer said that he was instructed not to wait for any answer.”

The duchess looked at the large coarse writing of the superscription, and concluded that the envelope contained the petition of some mendicant for charity. She felt but little inclined at that moment to do aught to relieve the sorrows of any human being. She tore off the cover, with a savage satisfaction at the prospect of an opportunity of revenging, even on an unknown beggar, the smart which made her at enmity with all the world; and read greedily, breathlessly, while a ghastly paleness spread itself over her face, and her heart seemed to suspend its action. She had read but the first line or two, when, with a ferocious and cruel smile, her fingers clutched the little miniature in its case, and closed over it with a grasp as convulsing as if the throat of her enemy were beneath their pressure. But the letter

was read with the intensest avidity to the last word. The miserable woman then let it fall from her hands, and threw herself backward on the cushion of the large chair in which she sat, while the violent heaving of her bosom, the rapid contraction and distension of her nostrils, and the rush of the returning blood to brow, cheek, and neck, indicated the agony of passion that swept over her like a tempest wind. And all the while she held the fatal portrait at arm's length before her, staring at the unopened case, which she seemed to lack courage to unclose.

By degrees the violence of the storm in her blood and brain subsided to a treacherous calm, and she remained for a few minutes as if lost in abstraction. Then silently motioning her women to leave her, she glanced round her as they left the chamber, as if to be sure that she was indeed alone, and then with a sudden spring forward, rapid and fierce as the bound of a tigress on its prey, she tore open the case of the picture, and fixing her distended eyes on the beautiful face in the pride of its youthful bloom, remained staring at it, as if it had blasted her sight like the head of a Medusa. Once again all the blood ran back to her bursting heart, as she gazed, and left a ghastly and livid paleness on her features, reflected in the glass before her in horrible contrast to the soft peach-bloom on the lovely girlish face in the fatal picture.

Notable was the difference of the effect produced in the two women, the Duchess Veronica and the Contessa Cecilia, by the comparison of their features with the disastrous beauty of that same portrait which had been made by each of them. No illusion softened to the despairing wife the truth of her discomfiture. The stake in her case was too tremendously great to permit any self-love or vanity to conceal for an instant the blasting truth. It was with her no mere triumph of coquetry, no itch for admiration, no question of whistling back a fickle lover to the lightly-worn allegiance of an hour. It was her all, her life, the wreck of heart and soul, that were doomed by the fatal beauty of those girlish features.

She began walking rapidly to and fro across the large chamber, muttering from time to time:

“Not this! no! it shall not be . . . I, the daughter of a princely line! . . . sweep her from my path, as I spurn her image . . .” and she dashed to the other end of the floor with her foot the miniature, as she passed it in her walk; “. . . robbed of my husband’s love by a peasant in right of a painted cheek . . . Caterina Canacci! beware, beware! Be warned! . . . Yes; so it shall be,” she continued, after a long pause, during which she had ceased from her hurried walk, and stood deep in thought; “so it shall be! There *shall* be a warning. There shall

be yet a door for repentance opened both to him and to her!"

With these words she recommenced her walk somewhat more calmly. But the thin bloodless lips were closely compressed; there was a dangerous gleam in the fierce hard eyes, heavy gloom upon the lowering brow. And for several hours she continued thus apparently in deep thought.

* * * * *

About three weeks later in the year, towards the latter end of November, a little after the hour of the Ave Maria, the thick dusty cloud-curtain of two centuries rises on the next scene of this drama, as the contemporary diarists and chroniclers have preserved it for us.

Very few of the many thousand visitors of all nations who every year pass under Vasari's fine colonnade of the "Uffizi," on their way to the world-famous gallery above it, are aware that between the entrance nearest the Palazzo Vecchio and the door at the foot of the grand stair leading to the gallery, they pass the former entrance of one of the oldest, and once one of the most famous, churches in Florence. Many Florentines even, whose whole lives have been passed within the walls of their native city, would be unable to tell, if asked, the whereabouts of the once celebrated church of St. Peter the Greater, otherwise called San Pietro in Scheraggio, or St. Peter in the

Ditch. Yet if Dante had been told that a day would come when a stranger might ask in vain his way in Florence to San Pietro Scheraggio, he might have replied, perhaps, that the time might well come, nay, not improbably was at hand, when Florence should become even as Babylon, by reason of the wickedness of its people; but it assuredly would have appeared incredible to him that a free Tuscan senate should be sitting in the council-hall of the almost adjoining palace, not a few of whose members would have been puzzled to point out the site of one of the principal churches and monasteries of the city, still in part existing almost within a hundred yards of them. But Messer Giorgio Vasari, when planning for his patron Cosmo the building of the new "Uffizi," which was to contain and reunite all the "offices" and magistracies of the city, thought more of the regularity and fair proportions of his own work than of preserving the work of his predecessors. And the venerable old church, once glorious with its three grand naves, its cloister, its cemetery, its infinite number of sepulchral monuments inscribed with the records of the old fathers of the republic, was pared away, and hustled, and built up, and effectually hidden by the fine new Palladian, or rather Vassarian front of the new building. The door of the diminished church—now church no more—fashioned to match the other doors under the colonnade, and like them

opening off it, is rarely opened now. When the persons of this history were living and making the misery of each other by their vices, passions, and follies, the new door of the old church more frequently stood open, and St. Peter in the Ditch, though hidden as now, was sufficiently well known to the Florentines; church-going made a much larger part of the daily life in Florence in those days than it does in these.

It was the vigil of some festival. A few long slender candles on the principal altar, and here and there the glimmer of a lamp hanging before an image of the Virgin, barely prevented the church from being in total darkness. Yet there was a congregation of worshippers, and a drowsy hum of litanies rose and fell on the ear in the cadences of a monotonous chant. In the immediate vicinity of the scattered shrine-lamps there was a little oasis of feeble light, within the circumference of which the features of some hood-shadowed face were rendered visible, or the bald crown of some aged penitent glistened white as the twinkling ray rested on it. But the remoter parts of the church lay in deep shadow; infinite were the capricious effects of light and shade produced by the multifarious irregularities, projecting pilasters, receding chapels, and isolated columns of the building; and strangely picturesque the uncertain outline of groups and figures in the dim chiaroscuro. The majority of those present

were doubtless there for a religious object, for the earning that is—cheaply enough, inasmuch as no domestic circle or pleasant occupation was deserted for the purpose, and lamp-oil was saved the while—of the indulgences promised as the reward of attendance there. But the social habits of that period were such as to amply justify the statement that many of the dimly visible figures who lurked behind pillars, or crouched on the steps of distant altars, were intent on matters calculated to make future penance necessary, rather than on performing that due for former sins. In either case it was all good for the trade of the place, and these chiaroscuro services, despite the notorious scandals to which they gave rise, were accordingly much in favour with the priesthood.

Among those who were evidently not there to pray, nor even to take part in the mechanical routine which passed for praying, was, on the evening in question, a thickly-veiled female figure, which had posted itself in the shadow of a column just outside the edge of one of the light-circles that have been described. There were several places vacant on the faldstools, on which the light fell just in front of her; but she preferred to remain standing in the obscurity. It was observable, too, that she was entirely alone; a solecism in the etiquette of the period, which no woman of respectable position, whatever her general conduct or

special errand, permitted herself. It seemed, too, as if she had ventured on this step for the purpose of meeting some one, for her glance was continually turned towards the door with a movement indicative of nervous expectation. Many quitted the church, or entered it, and passed on to places in distant parts of it. Still the veiled figure kept her post impassibly in the shade of her column; so it was evident that, if she were really waiting for somebody, she was sure that the expected person would come to the spot at which she had taken up her station.

At length two women entered, and came straight to the seats in the light in front of the veiled figure. No sooner had they reached the spot where the light fell on their features, than it became evident that they were, or that one of them was, the object of her watch. Both the new comers, the mistress and the maid, for such they clearly were, were young and handsome, the former very eminently so. Crossing themselves, they kneeled at one of the faldstools, and at once proceeded methodically to recite the appointed offices; while the woman who had been awaiting their coming, stretching forward her head from out the shadow, gazed intently on the lovely face before her. For a while she seemed entirely absorbed in the contemplation of it. Then suddenly drawing up her figure, and throwing up her eyes with an expres-

sion of earnest prayer, her lips moved with some words of eager supplication that assuredly were not written in hymn-book or missal; and suddenly, with a swift movement, she knelt by the side of the beautiful young woman she had been observing with so strange an expression. And turning her face towards her, so that her lips were within a few inches of the other's ear, but still keeping her veil down, in a deep whisper she said through her closed teeth:

"Caterina Canacci, daughter of Pasquale Bassi, the dyer, I, Veronica, Duchess of San Giuliano, am here to warn you. In mercy I warn you, though no mercy have you deserved from me, and none shall you find, if the warning be in vain. Base-born! You have dared to contaminate with your mercenary love a noble family. Now listen! If the duke come again to your house of infamy, so use the meeting that it be the last. Should he come a second time, and you admit him within your door . . . pass quickly to your shrift, for your doom will have been signed. I, the wife of Jacopo Salviati, now pronounce it, and will execute it."

Having thus spoken, she rose from her knees and hurried from the church.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST ACT OF THE LADY VERONICA'S "LITTLE COMEDY."

CATERINA had slunk back to her home, as soon as her accuser had vanished, overpowered with shame and terror. She was well aware that Salviati had taken careful precautions to secure the secrecy of his visits to the Via dei Pilastrì, and that he attached much importance to the concealment of their intimacy from the world. And of course it was not difficult to divine that the duchess was of all persons the last whose ears he would have wished the guarded secret to reach. What power of working woe to her, or perhaps even to Jacopo himself, this great and lofty lady might possess—what shape the vengeance of an outraged wife, of such high place and rank, might take—was all misty and uncertain to Caterina, and more terrible from its undefined vagueness. She felt keenly enough the greatness of her unpardonable offence against the duchess; and could not help wondering at the moderation which was con-

tent to warn before it struck. But, that the dreadful discovery of her relations with the duke must have the effect of putting an end to them, she could not doubt. And she contemplated with an agony almost equal to that felt by the duchess herself, the certainty that her next interview with her lover would be the last—with an agony almost equal, but not quite, for some of the elements which intensified the bitterness of the cup to the duchess were absent from that of Caterina.

The Lady Veronica had wronged her humbly-born rival in one phrase of the passionate denunciation she had hurled against her in the church. Her love for Jacopo was not “mercenary.” It may have been that those first profoundly corrupt corruptors of her early innocence had, as one of them cynically avowed, brought Salviati to the Casa dei Canacci from purely mercenary motives. But the love which had grown up between her and Jacopo Salviati was not a mercenary, but—though an unhallowed—a true love on either side. When the Duca di San Giuliano married the Lady Veronica Cybo, and when Caterina Bassi accepted the hand of old Signor Canacci, both had been guilty of mercenary love—in such sense as mercenary motives can ever be predicated of that much-misused word; they had both, from mercenary motives, pretended to love. If no princely marriages, and no “assured bed and board,” no

“great matches,” in short, had come in the way, the love of Jacopo and Caterina might have been a heaven-blessed union. But there was the fatal error in the top line of the sum, and the whole column of figures was necessarily, therefore, irremediably wrong to the end!

That next visit of the duke to Casa Canacci followed very shortly upon the terrible one from the duchess; and, as may be easily imagined, was *not* the last. Caterina was astonished at the smallness of the effect which the terrible tidings she had looked forward with such dread to telling, produced upon her lover. Jacopo appeared to be more angry than alarmed. He muttered something about his precautions of secrecy having been more for the duchess’s own sake than for his own. As for Caterina’s share in the matter, it did not seem to strike him that any harm either in fame or fortune could come to her from its being known that she was the favoured and exclusive mistress of so great a Sultan as the Duca di San Giuliano. And as things ordinarily went in the world in which they were both living, he was probably not far wrong in so deeming of her position. The Lady Veronica Cybo was, it must be admitted, a phenomenon much out of place in that world, and one calculated to throw its usual reckonings and ways not a little out of their ordinary track. The extent, however, to which it was capable of doing so, the Florentine

world and Salviati himself had yet to learn. And he had little difficulty in soothing Caterina's alarm, and teaching her to look on the threats of the duchess as the impotent ill-temper of an unreasonable woman.

So the duke's visits to the Casa Canacci were as frequent as ever; and the sole result of the extraordinary step taken by the duchess appeared to be that they were less carefully guarded from the suspicions of the world. To Salviati himself, his wife had said no word alluding to Caterina, to her discoveries respecting her, or to her own visit to the church of San Pietro Maggiore. She was only more than ordinarily gloomy and silent; and the fits of violent passion, upbraiding and entreaty which had from time to time made his home intolerable to the light-hearted libertine, altogether ceased. There was a dead lull in Casa Salviati, which led him to think, that, *per Baco!* it would have been better never to have attempted any concealment from his wife at all.

* * * * *

One morning, about the middle of December, still in that same year 1638, the Duchess Veronica said to her tire-woman, Francesca, as the latter was about to leave the room after having completed her mistress's toilette:

“Is thy brother Beppo the fringe-maker still in the same house he occupied last year, Francesca?”

“He is so, please you, signora, and his business thrives well there.”

“That is well. I am pleased to hear it. Now listen to me. To-day thou wilt go down into the city to pay a visit to thy brother; say to him that I have need of a private chamber in which to receive the visit of a person whom it does not suit me to see here, or at the palazzo in town. I know that I can trust both him and thee. Thou mayst fancy, if thou wilt,” she added, with a dreary attempt at a smile, “that I, too, have a love affair a-foot, and need a trysting-place to meet my cavalier; but that is no business of thine or of thy brother. I need the accommodation but for an hour, say, at the Ave Maria to-morrow evening, and I am sure he will manage to provide me with it.”

“Assuredly, my lady. Beppo will be only too proud to do your ladyship’s bidding in that or any other thing your ladyship may condescend to order him. Your ladyship will excuse the meanness of the chamber. He will do his best, as in duty bound; but I doubt he has no accommodation fit to offer to your ladyship.”

“Let him not put himself to any trouble. Four bare walls, my child, even if there be not so much as a chair in them, so they secure privacy, will suffice for my need. Now go! Let me hear this has been arranged when you return to the villa.

The sole object of your going is to visit your brother by my permission—you understand."

"I understand your ladyship. Many thanks to your ladyship for the holiday!" added the well-drilled waiting-woman, as if to show her readiness to act out a lie in all its details at the shortest notice.

"And Francesca!"

"Yes, my lady."

"Tell Pippo Carrarrese to come to me here. I wish to speak to him."

"Yes, my lady." Francesca vanished to don in all haste her best skirt and mantle for her welcome trip to Florence, wondering much on what business her mistress could possibly be bound.

In a few minutes Pippo Carrarrese stood before his mistress. Philip was, as that nickname of his—the only name he had beyond his baptismal one—indicated, a native of Carrara; and as such a born subject of the Prince of Massa, the Lady Veronica's father. He was one of those retainers, half military, half menial, who were to be found in every princely house attached to the more immediate service of their lords—men whose whole pride and self-respect consisted in believing themselves, as well as their despot masters, to be superior to and exempt from laws, which were made, according to their theory, only for the subject herd who lived outside ducal and baronial castles—men whose sole virtue was

hound-like fidelity to their keepers, and perfect readiness to obey their behests, let them be what they might, from carrying a billet to murdering a bishop before the altar. Philip of Carrara had been "given" to the Lady Veronica by her noble father, when she left his court as Salviati's wife, and he was considered in the Salviati household as her especial retainer and servitor. He was a grey and grisly-looking man of some sixty years of age; and now stood, cap in hand and silent, before the duchess, waiting her commands.

"Get thee into the saddle, Pippo, and make the best of thy way to the Osteria del Giardino, in the Via dei Pilastri. There give the host this paper, and bid him point out to thee the man named thereon. When thou hast assured thyself that only two ears are listening to thee, say to that man that a person of quality—a lady, thou mayst say—wishes to speak with him on matters concerning his interest. Give him these gold pieces, as earnest of more to be had from the sender of them. Bid him hold himself in readiness to accompany thee when thou shalt call for him to-morrow evening about the Ave Maria. This done, return hither to me. Have you understood?"

"Perfectly, your ladyship. I take for certain that I am to speak no word as to the person I serve, and to wear no badge of the house."

"Right, my friend. Also let none here know

the scope of thy errand. Here is money to drink a cup with the host. Now go !”

And the second messenger to the city from the Villa Salviati departed on his errand.

The duchess, when left alone, began walking to and fro in her chamber, as she has been described to have done on a former occasion. But her frame of mind was now a very different one.

“Now let me think !” she muttered to herself, as she pressed the ends of the fingers of one hand on her heavily frowning forehead. “Or rather,” she continued, “let me not think, but act. Of thinking there has been, Heaven wots, enow ! The course before me is straight—straight and clear ! The judgment has been pronounced—surely a righteous judgment—I am henceforward but the minister for its execution. What next is to be done ? Ay, doing ! that is the thing needed. Would that the hours could all be filled with action ! The letter to my brother ! That may be done at once. The letter to my noble and trusty brother !”

She sat down at a writing-table, and having written rapidly a few lines, placed them in an envelope, and addressed it to “The most Illustrious and Noble Prince Don Carlo Cybo, his own hands.”

And then the nervous weary walking was recommenced ; and the disobedient brain would think over and over again the thoughts which the will

had decided on dismissing; and it seemed as if the hours which must elapse before the next step in the action for which the duchess was so eager could be taken, would never wear themselves away.

At length the close of the following day was reached, and the duchess, closely veiled, and attended only by Pippo, proceeded to the house of the fringe-maker, where she was obsequiously but silently ushered into a small room at the back of the house on the first floor.

“Now,” she said to her follower, as she alighted at the door of the obscure house, “go to your appointment in the *Via dei Pilastri*, and bring the man here. Tell him he will see no one, save a lady alone, and that money is to be had for the coming to fetch it.”

Then began again the restless pacing backwards and forwards of the few steps possible in the little room in which she found herself.

In about half an hour, which seemed to her impatience three hours at least, there came heavy steps up the stair and a tap at the door, and Pippo silently ushered into the room the drunkard son of Caterina’s aged husband, Bartolommeo Canacci.

If the five years which had passed between Signor Giustino Canacci’s marriage and the year 1638 had changed him from a hale old man to a half bedridden dotard, the alteration for the worse which they had worked in his son was yet greater.

He was already, at thirty years of age, a mere wreck. Long-continued habits of intemperance had so seasoned and yet at the same time shaken his nervous system, that he could hardly be said to be ever drunk, or ever sober. With trembling legs and palsied hands, blear-eyed, haggard, bloated and blotched in face, he was as unprepossessing an object as it is possible to imagine. And as he shuffled into the room where the duchess was awaiting him, with a stupid look of half-awakened curiosity mixed with a would-be defiant swagger, it needed an effort on her part so far to overcome the disgust he occasioned her, as to enter on the business with him which had brought her there.

Motioning him with her hand to sit on the opposite side of a little table in the centre of the room to that at which she seated herself as he entered, "Signor Bartolommeo Canacci," she began, in a slow, clear, magisterial kind of voice, "are you aware that the good name of your respectable and honourable house has been destroyed and made a byword in Florence?"

"Shouldn't wonder, lady fair, whoever you are. They are a bad lot in Casa Canacci, the old father and the young mother-in-law—a bad lot, fit to break an honest man's heart. But you know the song—

When there's sorrow in thinking,
Then there's wisdom in drinking.

If it was not for practising that wisdom I should have gone to the church, heels foremost, long ago. But what have you got to say in the matter?"

"This I have to say, Bartolommeo Canacci. The vile abandoned woman whom your doting father made his wife, and who has made the shame of his life and the misery of yours, has also been the bane of mine."

"You don't mean that! Does she lock away every farthing of money—money that should be your own—where you can't get at it? Does she keep you out of your own house? Does she drive you to drink to get rid of care?"

"I tell you she has done worse than all this to me. Homeless! Yes, has she not made me homeless too? For what is my home to me! Man! I hate Caterina Canacci as no human being ever hated another yet!"

"Well, I am not much behind you in that matter, I'll warrant me. We are two in a boat, so far. But the worthy gentleman who brought me here to your ladyship said something, if I am not mistaken, about some transaction in current coin to take place here this evening. Now, I don't think it likely, upon the whole, that he could have alluded to any disbursement to be made by me to your ladyship."

"Are you in want of money?"

"A pretty question! Why, who the devil is

not in want of money? Is not the grand-duke always wanting money? Don't I look as if I had as princely or saintly an appetite for coin as any duke in the land, or saint in the calendar?"

"Do you like revenge on those who have injured you?"

"Why, what a question again! Do you like victuals when you are hungry? Have you any taste for rest when you are weary? Haven't I told you already that I hate . . . one . . . or two, mayhap? Yes!" and his half-bantering, half-maudlin manner changed suddenly to an expression of brutal ferocity, while a dangerous gleam lighted up for a moment his dull dead eyes. "Yes, I *do* like revenge: perhaps, if I got a taste of it, should like it better than anything else to be had in this dog-hole of a world."

"Right, friend! I like it best of anything in all the world." The duchess returned fixedly the cruel wolfish glare that shot from under his sullen overhanging brow, looking into his eyes with a gleam of hate, as fierce and deadly as his own. "And," she continued, after a pause, "we hate the same person."

The bloodshot eye of the commonplace ruffian deadened and fell beneath the intensity of vindictive passion concentrated in the face of the duchess. The lower nature and deteriorated organisation of the man was dominated and almost daunted by the

superior energy and strength of will of the woman. The wretched drunkard wanted sundry things, after all, more than gratification of his hatred. Hatred is a spiritual passion. The body has no craving for it. And with the degraded sot, his body and its cravings had to be served before any needs of the spirit, however low and ignoble in their nature, could be heard. Drink, and wherewithal to procure it, was infinitely more necessary to him than the luxury of revenge. With the Lady Veronica it was otherwise. She spoke less than the whole truth, when she said that she loved revenge better than anything else in all the world. She might, with truth, have said that it was the only thing for which she cared and lived; that all else had become vanity, emptiness, and indifference. And yet the Lady Veronica was a mother, and had been a passionately loving wife. But it may be doubted whether she would *now* have bartered the prospect of revenge on her rival, even for the restoration of her husband's affection. For in such organisations as that of the duchess, vindictive hate is like the serpent which was generated from the rod of the prophet. No sooner had it been quickened in the soul, than it grows with awful rapidity to monstrous stature, and devours every other passion, and desire, and affection.

The flame of passion, therefore, that the lady's words had suddenly kindled in Bartolommeo's heart

sunk down again as suddenly ; cowed and quenched by the intenser passion that blazed in her own.

“ But, may be,” continued the duchess, perceiving the quick burning out of the straw fire she had raised, “ may be you feel inclined to be indulgent to this gay young mother-in-law ? Perhaps you can not only forgive her for rendering your present life one of shifts and poverty, and making you a homeless vagabond, but are content that she should play out her game successfully to the end, be mistress of the old man’s house and property while he lives, and inherit all when he dies ? Perhaps your feeling is, that after all it will be best to content yourself for the remainder of your days with such alms as the bankrupt dyer’s daughter and her paramours may throw you from time to time out of the contents of the old man’s coffers ? I thought I saw something in your eye a moment since, which looked as if you were not exactly the man to bend your neck to such a lot, and lick the hand which flings you a grudged pittance out of your own goods. But perhaps I was mistaken in my estimate.”

A blacker scowl settled heavily on Bartolommeo’s repulsive features, as the duchess spoke ; but the fierce blaze of passion did not return to them. A long pause ensued, during which he seemed to be thinking, as far as his besotted and shattered mind was capable of thought. At last he answered :

“If your ladyship has no particular objection, I think we had better understand a little what the business in hand is, before we talk any further. I was brought here to you. I did not seek you. You know what you want. I don’t. You know who I am. You may be the Queen of Sheba, for all I know of you. You want something of me. I have still to learn what it is. You did not bring me here, I suppose, merely to ask if I liked money and if I liked revenge? And as to what you say about my cursed mother-in-law—a bad death and a short shrift to her!—inheriting all the property, and my submitting to it; why, look you, the case stands thus; and as there are only four eyes* here present, there is no good reason against stating the case plainly. If I had thought it worth my while to cut her throat for the sake of paying off old scores, and preventing her standing between me and the old man’s money, why I should have done it. You, I take it, for some reason or other, would like to have her throat cut, unless your hate is so dainty-stomached as to look for the treat of burning her alive. But I am not likely to do for you what I did not do long ago for myself. I have no taste for feeling the bargello’s fingers about my neck. The game is too dangerous, do you see, for my liking.”

* “A quattr’ occhi” is a favourite Tuscan expression for a tête-à-tête.

The duchess, on her side, paused awhile, considering her reply to this address. She bit her lip, rose from her chair, and took one or two turns up and down the little chamber before she decided on her course of action. Then, seating herself again on the side of the table opposite to him, she said :

“— There is, as you say, no reason why the whole matter in hand should not be plainly spoken between us. I have no wish to take an unfair advantage of you by remaining unknown to you, while I know you. I am the Duchess of San Giuliano.”

Bartolommeo started, and lifted his hand to his hat, rising as he did so, and striving to remember whether he had said anything that could be dangerous to him—said in such a presence. The duchess motioned to him to reseal himself, and continued :

“ I have told you that I hate Caterina Canacci, and you may probably be now at no loss to comprehend why I hate her. But you have mistaken me in supposing that my anger against her would lead me to take, or to wish taken, any such measures as you have alluded to. They are too dangerous, as you well remark, even if one wished to be guilty of murder. No. My project of revenge limits itself simply to the infliction of shame, and exposure, and the consequent cessation of—relations, which—are—loathsome to me.” A choking sensation in her

throat made the utterance of the last words difficult to the Lady Veronica. "I purpose," she went on, "introducing a number of persons into the house, good friends of mine, at an hour when she shall be caught in the midst of her infamous revels; when your father will be, shall be, made aware of his own dishonour, and of the character of his wife, and her public shame and disgrace shall become the byword of the town."

"Is that all, my lady? To my mind it seems a rather tasteless dish of vengeance for a hungry stomach. But then I am but a plain man. What is it that your honourable ladyship wants of me in the matter? Now your ladyship has condescended to tell me your ladyship's name, you know, of course, that I am at your service."

"What I want of you, Signor Canacci, is simply this: It would be difficult for the friends I spoke of to obtain entrance at the right moment without making much more disturbance than is desirable. The door would undoubtedly be shut and barred against them. I look to you to have it opened. My friends shall keep out of sight under the shelter of the wall, while you alone ask admittance; and when the door is opened they will enter with you."

"In all that, your ladyship, I see no difficulty at all. It will, at all events, make la Caterina pass a bad half-hour enough. Egad! I should like the fun. But your honourable ladyship will no doubt

understand that, though there be in such a matter no such consequences to be feared as if the question were of throats to be cut, still it is likely enough that my connivance may be called in question, to my loss, and it was probably in view of such a risk that your ladyship was so considerate as to speak, by the mouth of the worthy gentleman who brought me hither, of moneys to be had in recompense for my attendance here?"

"Those who serve me are not wont to remain unpaid, or to grumble at the rate of their payment."

"No doubt; but it was with reference to that part of the business in hand, that your ladyship condescended to inquire at the beginning of this conversation whether I were in need of money. Permit me, *eccellentissima signora*,* to repeat, that I am in truth very greatly in need—indeed in urgent need—of some small supply."

"Remember, Signor Bartolommeo, that in carrying out this little scheme you will be in a very important degree serving your own interest. For it is not likely that the old man your father, when he shall have been made acquainted with the conduct of his wife, and shall know that the dishonour she has done him has been made the common talk of the

* According to the ceremonial of that time, the only personages for whom the title of *Eccellentissimo* was reserved, in Tuscany, were the Dukes Strozzi and Salviati. It shortly afterwards became almost universal.

town, will persist in disinheriting his son to enrich his widow.”

“Most true, signora mia colendissima!* If Ser Giustino have still sense and self-respect enough to feel his position as he ought—which, alas! may be much doubted—such a result would be likely to follow. But all that is uncertain, very uncertain And my needs are certain and pressing.”

“And I repeat that they shall be cared for liberally. Now, mark me well! The day and hour when this little comedy shall be played out, is not yet fixed. It shall be played very shortly; as soon as I have arranged the matter with the knot of friends who are to be the chief performers. You are to hold yourself in readiness to do your part any evening on which you may be called on. You are in the habit, I suppose, of being seen in the house from time to time?”

“Now and then! Rarely enough, to tell your ladyship the truth. I am not received there in a manner to make my visits very frequent.”

“But they are sufficiently so, I presume, for you to be known to the servant, and to be sure of not being refused admittance?”

“Oh! for that matter, yes, your ladyship. They could hardly refuse to open my father’s door to me.”

* The phrase may be tolerably accurately rendered by “your most worshipful ladyship.”

“Very good. Perhaps it would be well to drop in two or three times during the next week or so, and comport yourself in a manner to show the woman that she has nothing to fear from you. Be quiet, inoffensive, sober—you understand me? Then you have nothing further to do than to await my summons. It shall be brought you by the man who conducted you hither. My friends will be ready in their hiding-place. A dark night shall be selected. You will cause the door to be opened. That is all that is required of you. My friends will do the rest. Have you marked me?”

“Every word, your most excellent ladyship. I shall not fail to be ready for your orders.”

“Let it be understood, then, that you will be found any evening, without the necessity of any further communication, at the Osteria del Giardino. You will know the man with whom you spoke to-day? To make all certain, he shall say, when he calls for you, ‘The comedy for to-night is Love’s Revenge.’ That shall be your pass-word. Now take this purse. When the trick has been played, you shall not want for more. So it is all understood and agreed?”

“In every point, most gracious lady,” said Bartolommeo, rising and making a profound bow. “Doubt not that all shall be done accurately, according to your orders. I shall be found at the Osteria.”

"Enough," said the duchess, rising also. "Of course," she added, "it will be necessary to let fall no word of this little plan, or of this interview, till the play has been played out. Afterwards I care not. To speak before would only spoil the scheme, and lose you many a purse hereafter such as that now in your hand."

"Of course, your ladyship. What am I that such a caution should be needed!"

"Good! Send me the man who called you to me. You will find him below."

And the duchess returned up the hill to the villa, grimly satisfied with the result of her interview, and specially with the change she had made in the mode of conducting it, as soon as she had discovered the manner of man she had to deal with.

As she alighted at the door of her home, she drew a letter from her bosom, the same which she had written and addressed to her brother, and turning to her faithful servitor, Pippo, said:

"Saddle for Massa to-morrow morning. Deliver this into the hands of my brother. Wait for his orders before returning. Speak to none here of your errand."

Old Pippo bowed and took the letter in silence. The duchess mounted to her room to count the hours till the next act in her "little comedy" should be ready for performance.

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER EVENING IN CASA CANACCI.

THE letter which Pippo Carrarrese carried to Massa ran as follows :—

“ Most excellent Prince and dear Brother,—This letter will be delivered into your honoured hands by our faithful Pippo, whose trustiness is known to you. Of myself and of things here I have little that is good or agreeable to tell you. Foul and dishonourable wrong has been done me. And it is not to a prince of our name and blood that it is necessary to tell the care which is now occupying me. I might enter into the particulars of that which is on my heart, sure of your sympathy, support, and assistance. But, under the circumstances, I think it best to do what has to be done, alone. You may be quite sure that the honour of our family is safe in my keeping, and that I know how to vindicate it. The purport of the present, therefore, is to request you, my brother, to send back with Pippo, under his

guidance and orders, three trusty men—let them be *men*, you understand me—devoted to our family. Let them be well mounted to ride at need—men with ready hands and silent tongues. For the present there needs no more to be said. May God have you in his holy keeping, my brother.

“Your loving and dutiful sister,

“VERONICA.”

The result of this letter was, that on a dark evening, towards the latter end of December, Pippo, accompanied by three other well-mounted but unarmed men of his own class and sort, presented themselves at the Prato gate of Florence. The gate had been already some time closed. But on the strangers making themselves known as servants of the duchessa, they were readily allowed to enter the city. Pippo conducted his men to a small hostelry, situated in one of the narrow streets behind the Palazzo Vecchio, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Mercato Vecchio—which was kept by a Massa man, and was accordingly well known to the Villa Salviati people, and frequented by all the Massa and Carrara folks, whom the connection of the duchess with that country or any other circumstance brought to Florence.

Having housed them, Pippo at once started for the villa, to report his return to the duchess, and receive her orders. They were, that for the presen

he should only hold himself and the three Massa men in readiness, supply them quietly with arms from the villa, and caution them strictly not to be seen in the city, to keep close in their quarters during the day, and leave them, if at all, only after nightfall.

These matters duly arranged, the duchess had again to wait with such patience as she could master the further development of her designs.

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The last day of the year is a day of note in Catholic countries. Among men of every persuasion, indeed, the close of one of the stages of the life so rapidly hurrying away, cannot but be felt as having a certain degree of solemnity attached to it. And men "keep it," accordingly, with observances which differ as their temperaments and characters differ. It becomes a festival or a fast, not as the retrospect of the year that is already so rapidly floating away down the stream into the gulf of the infinite past is in any degree satisfactory or the reverse, but as it is Heraclitus or Democritus who makes it.

The Church pronounces the day a fast-day, in that it is the vigil of the feast-day of the new year. And all those good sons of the Church who make a point of complying with her ordinances, especially the pious confraternities, whose scope and usages have been described, obediently observe it as such accordingly. On such an occasion it might be

supposed that the devout Duke of San Giuliano, whose attendance at the meetings of his confraternity had been so exemplarily regular, would not have failed to avail himself of the opportunity of assuming his penitential gown and hood as usual. But he did not do so. And it would seem that the certainty that he would not visit the *Via dei Pilastri* on that night, was the occasion for which the duchess was waiting for the further prosecution of her "little comedy." For, notwithstanding what she had said to Bartolommeo about the exposure and shame she intended to inflict upon Caterina, it did not appear to enter into her plans, whatever they were, to put them in execution when the duke was there. In any case, it is certain that Salviati was not in the house of his mistress on the night of that 31st of December, 1638, and that he did on that night sleep at home, in *Villa Salviati*.

It is further especially recorded by the contemporary chroniclers that *Signore Vincenzo Carlini* and *Signore Jacopo Serselli* were with Caterina in *Casa Canacci* on that evening. Under all the circumstances of the case, it certainly appears strange that they should have been there, especially in Salviati's absence. The fact may be taken as an illustration the more, of the social habits and feelings of the time. But it probably should not be understood to cast any further reproach on the unfortunate Caterina than is inseparable from the

mere circumstance of her permitting these men, situated as she was with regard to them, to come there to sup and make merry. Salviati, it might be thought, ought to have protected her against any such associations—more especially as there does not seem any reason to believe that their presence there was kept secret from him.

Be this as it may, on that night Carlini and Serselli were with Caterina in Casa Canacci, and the aged husband was fast asleep upstairs as usual, when, about the third hour after the Ave Maria, a knocking was heard at the door. The servant-girl, Nina—who was such a treasure, we remember—went upstairs to a window from which she could look down over the door, and called out to ask who was there. People in those days in Florence did not open their doors after sundown without precautions.

“A friend!” cried the voice of Bartolommeo from below, making the customary reply to the question. “Open the door, Nina; it’s all right.”

“Ah, but Signor Bartolommeo, it is not always all right when you come to the house o’ nights at such hours. Are you sure you are sober?—that is to say, as near sober as ever you are. Will you behave yourself decently, and not wake up the old man?”

“Don’t you see I am as sober as a bishop? A

great deal soberer than some of them are at this moment, I'll be bound."

"But what is it you want, Signor Bartolommeo? It is getting late, and my mistress will be going to bed directly," persisted Nina, who seemed to have more misgiving than usual about letting her master's son into the house, although in obedience to the suggestions of the duchess he had, in his recent visits, taken unusual care to behave inoffensively.

"What do I want?" returned Bartolommeo, speaking in apparently perfect good temper; "why to pay my compliments to the Signora Caterina on this of all nights in the year. Come, Nina, open the door, there is a good girl, and don't keep me standing here in the cold any longer. I told the Signora Caterina that I should look in this evening."

Now Nina knew very well that when Bartolommeo came thus to the door, the usual alternative was to admit him or to have a dreadful disturbance in the street, calling the neighbours to their windows, and generally waking up old Signor Giustino: all which would have been exceedingly inconvenient, for many reasons, under the circumstances. So she replied from the window:

"Well, then, Signor Bartolommeo, if you will promise not to wake Signor Giustino He was fractious enough to-night, I can tell you,

and the Holy Virgin knows the trouble we had in getting him to sleep! . . . I will come down to the door directly. The fact is, the signora has some friends to supper to-night, and——”

“I know that very well! I know all about it! For whom do you take me? I shall only drink just one cup in all good fellowship with Signor Carlini and his friends.”

“Well, I am coming,” returned Nina, cautiously shutting the window from which she had held the colloquy.

She ran first, however, into the room downstairs, where Caterina and her guests were seated at the supper-table, to warn them of the intruder’s coming.

“There’s Signor Bartolommeo at the door, my lady, seeking admittance. I tried to send him away, but it was no use. He seems sober, for a wonder. He knows that these gentlemen are here, and says he only wants to drink a cup in good fellowship with them, and pay his respects to your ladyship. I suppose I must let him in. We shall have the devil to pay in the street else!”

“Oh! let the Signor Bartolommeo come in by all means!” cried both the gentlemen. “He will go to the pothouse and tell all sorts of tales else. Better let him come in, and keep him in good humour.”

“You are sure he is alone, Nina?” asked Caterina.

“Oh! for that, my lady, yes! I looked up the street and down the street. There’s not a soul stirring.”

“Well! I suppose you must let him come in, then,” returned her mistress.

And Nina went to open the door.

“We will keep him quiet, this terrible son-in-law; never fear. And we will see him safe out before we go, *cara mia!*” said Carlini.

“But how would it be,” said Serselli, “if he were to take it into his drunken head to come here when . . . we know who . . . is here?”

“The duke,” replied Caterina, blushing slightly, and with a little toss of her pretty head. “He knows better, I think, than to interfere with Jacopo Salviati. It would be as much as his ears are worth!”

Nina had, as she said, looked up and down the street, as she stood speaking with Bartolommeo at the window, and she had seen no one but him standing out in the street, and barely visible, even so, in the unlighted darkness of the winter night. Even had she thought of turning her eyes down to the foot of the wall, she would have been unable to distinguish two figures on either side of the door wholly muffled in cloaks of dark colour, and standing close with their backs against the wall, in the additional darkness caused by the wide overhanging eaves of the roof.

Poor Nina ! Signor Vincenzo Carlini had said she was "invaluable;" that he had placed her in her present position for the sake of those precious talents of hers. She exercised them, it is to be supposed, to the best of her lights, or rather, as best she might, in the utter absence of any glimmer of light ! And now her little part in the great drama was done, and her uses over. Her patron, Signor Vincenzo, was reserved for an old age of reformation, respectability, and reverend authority. Did he ever think, it may be wondered, in those after years, of the fate of the poor girl, whose *bohême* existence came to so different a termination from his own !

Nina proceeded to open the door cautiously, as we have seen her do it on a former occasion. But no sooner was the bolt withdrawn than the door was violently pushed against her, and four men, hurling Bartolommeo headforemost in before them, rushed in behind him. The shock of the surprise was so great as to take from her the power of crying out for an instant. And in that instant the lamp she carried was knocked out, a cloak was suddenly thrown over her head, and a stiletto stab was dealt her in the bosom by so practised a hand that it reached the heart, and ended her life without a struggle or a groan.

While one of the four ruffians was thus engaged, two others seized Bartolommeo, and, holding their

daggers to his throat, signed to him to be silent as he cared for his life; the fourth carefully closed the open door. All this was done so quickly, deftly, and without confusion, that it was clear the whole action had been clearly arranged beforehand, and each actor appointed to his special part.

The next step was to proceed as noiselessly as possible to the room where Caterina was entertaining her guests. But in their total ignorance of the house, and in the darkness, the assassins did not succeed in accomplishing this. Bartolommeo seems to have been completely paralysed by terror, and to have taken no part whatever in the scene which followed. The bravoës, in endeavouring to find their way in the darkness, made some noise in the passage, which caused Carlini and Serselli to come to the door of the supper-room, surprised that Nina did not return with Bartolommeo, and imagining that the delay and the noise were occasioned by some incivility, or civility, offered by the latter to the pretty waiting-woman.

As soon as the door of the room in which they had been sitting was opened, the light streamed into the passage, which opened on the opposite side of a sort of inner hall or lobby. The two cavaliers and the intruders, therefore, saw each other at the same moment, and the latter rushed forward towards the lighted room. But the stairs leading to the upper part of the house opened

on the lobby close to the door of this chamber, and were thus between Caterina's guests and the strangers. A means of escape was thus offered to these gallant gentlemen, of which both instantly availed themselves. Leaving the unprotected Caterina to her fate, whatever it may be, at the hands of the ruffians, they rushed up the stairs, gained the roof, and thence reached that of the next house, into which they obtained admission. But not even then does it appear that they took any steps to obtain assistance, or to interfere in any way with what might be passing in the house they had just left; they simply established themselves at the window, and watched to see what might follow.

There were left, therefore, in Casa Canacci, old Ser Giustino, waked up from his sleep by the unwonted noise, and feebly calling from his bed to know what was the matter; Bartolommeo, almost paralysed by terror and as helpless as his father; the dead body of the murdered girl lying in the entry; Caterina, in presence of Pippo Carrarrese and his three followers.

The first thought of the terrified woman was that the object of the attack on the house was simply robbery.

"Do me no harm, my friends," she said; "I will make no resistance. We are not rich people, and there is little of value in the house. Take what you will."

"Your goods are safe as far as we are concerned. We are not thieves," answered Pippo. "Our errand here is a different one. In brief, Caterina Canacci," he continued, speaking with the calm impassive air of an official announcing a judicial sentence, "you must die this night. Your last hour is nearly spent."

"Die!" shrieked the miserable woman, while her face became ghastly with livid pallor, and her eye was distended by terror; "die! Now! This night! Nay, you are frightening me in jest. But 'tis bad jesting." She looked from one to the other of the hard, pitiless faces round her, in search of some justification of her suggestion. But she found there no ray of hope. She read no passion-stirred ferocity in their faces, but simply, quiet grim impassible determination.

"'Twere poor jesting, truly, if jest there were," returned Pippo; "but it is earnest, and it is certain, lady, that you must die this night, and this hour . . . ay! and within this quarter of an hour!"

"But it is impossible! I am not ready to die! I am not prepared! I have done no harm to any one. Nobody can wish my death!"

"My orders," resumed Pippo, in the same measured cold tones, "are that you should be informed that you are condemned to die by the Lady Veronica, Duchess of San Giuliano. The

nature of your offence against that noble lady, you doubtless know. I have no orders to allow you time for preparation. Nevertheless, I give you five minutes to make your peace with God."

A visible convulsive shudder passed through the wretched woman's frame at the mention of the name of the duchess. The reality of her doom and its certainty seemed suddenly to flash into her mind. Flinging up her arms, and glancing wildly from side to side like a hunted animal, she suddenly made a spring towards the door. But a single quiet and rapid stride of one of her executioners placed him between her and it. Turning with the unreasoning impulse of mere animal terror, she made a bound towards the opposite window. A similar movement on the part of another of the ruffians again showed her the utter hopelessness of escape.

"Lady!" said Pippo, with the voice of one speaking a doom certain as fate, "one minute of the five is already gone. In four more, you die!"

"Jacopo! Jacopo! Why are you not here to save me? Jacopo, must I die for your love? Will you let me die, Jacopo? Help! Jacopo! Quick! quick! to save me! Have you recollected," she continued, turning to Pippo, as a new possibility of hope dashed into her mind, "have you thought that the duke will assuredly avenge my death?"

Your own lives will pay for mine. Have you thought of that?"

"It is little we care for your Florentine duke or his anger. A dozen of such dukes could not save you from the vengeance of our lady!" said one of the Massa men, in the pride of his superiority to Florentine law.

But Pippo only repeated in his doomster's voice:

"Lady! two minutes of the five are gone. You have but three more to live."

"How can I die!" she shrieked in anguish. "How can I die, so young. Why should I die? I am not ill! I am in health! Oh! God! I cannot die! Save me! Will no one come? Will no one tell Jacopo?" Then with a sudden movement of her hands pressing back the long disordered tresses on either side of her forehead, as if she were striving to concentrate her thoughts on a new idea, she with two or three staggering steps reached Pippo's side, as he stood moodily frowning, with his arms folded under his cloak; and still holding her head between her hands, and leaning her forehead against his shoulder, said in a hoarse whisper, intended to be coaxing, "Now look! noble sir! see how much better it will be to save my life! Nobody shall ever know that I am alive! I will go away! go wherever you will . . . now, now, while it is dark. No one will ever know it; let us go away! Jacopo Salviati will reward you

nobly!" she added, with the inconsistency of a reeling brain; "Jacopo is generous, so generous! he will give you anything you can ask, if you save my life."

And her voice grew hoarser and her words broken by laboured panting, as she urged her desperate pleading.

But Pippo shook his head gravely and slowly; and only said, "Lady, three minutes out of the five are gone. You have only two to live."

"But . . . but . . . in any case . . . If I am to die"—and the words were panted forth brokenly, while the sweat-drops gathered on her brow—"There must be a reprieve! There is a reason! . . . a reason why it cannot be that I should be put to death now! . . . not death now! . . . I . . . the truth . . ." and the poor creature turned her face away, and stooping hid it in her shaking hands; I . . . have another life besides my own within me! It is the truth! Jacopo knows it is the truth! Therefore, you see . . . I cannot die to-night . . . not put my baby to death . . . You see there must be a reprieve!"

"One minute only remains of the time allowed you to make your peace with God. Kneel to the Holy Virgin, and say at least a Paternoster for a passing prayer. Kneel!"

"Oh! God! to die! to die! I have done no

wrong . . . I never sought . . . I can't pray!"

But she knelt, as she had been bidden, there in the midst of the floor, holding up both clasped hands rather in the attitude, as it seemed, of prayer to her executioner than to Heaven. Pippo secretly made a sign to one of the other men; who, replying by an almost imperceptible movement of the head, noiselessly stepped behind her; and drawing from its sheath at his girdle a little triangular-shaped dagger, and liberating his right arm from the folds of his cloak, stood ready to strike swiftly and surely.

The eye and entire attention of poor Caterina were directed to Pippo, who stood in front of her, and who alone had spoken during the terrible scene, with the exception of that one outburst of clannish defiance from one of the assassins, when the victim had threatened him with Salviati's vengeance. If in the mortal agony of her terror Caterina could be said to think at all, she thought that it was from Pippo that her death-blow would come. But she probably did not yet realise the fact that the last seconds of her life were quickly ebbing. Her vague impression probably was, that at the end of the minutes of whose lapse she had been so repeatedly warned, she should be definitively condemned; that her fate would then become certain. She strove, however, to fashion

at least her lips to prayer. What she would fain have prayed for was what in very truth and reality she earnestly desired, the present and immediate saving of her life. And it was to Pippo accordingly that her real prayer was addressed, as she knelt before him with her clasped hands upraised. But her lips recurred mechanically to the familiar formula, as to a conjuring spell connected in her poor dark mind with the idea of prayer. "Ave Maria, gratiâ plena! Dominus tecum!" she said; and as the last syllable escaped her lips, at a movement of Pippo's finger the dagger from behind was struck home unerringly. The hand which held it did its work well and skilfully. The steel entered the upstretched throat immediately above the collar-bone, and went straight to the heart.

It was not only because the granted time was up that Pippo gave the fatal sign at the moment he did. He belonged to a class of men, among whom religious faith, such as Rome inculcates, is apt to linger long after it has left other portions of the community. And it really was satisfactory to his conscience to think that he had so managed that his victim had the advantage of dying with holy words upon her lips.

"The stroke was well and workmanly struck, Nanni," he said; "there was no need of a second. Poveretta! How pretty she looked! Per Bacco! I don't marvel at the duke's taste! But the worst

has to be done yet ; and there is no time to be lost. Nanni and Carlo, see you to the body of the girl who was struck down in the entry, while Moro and I finish the job here."

The two men first addressed went out, and taking up the body of poor Nina, wrapped it in a cloak, and then cautiously opened the house door, and listened to hear if there was any movement in the street. All was perfectly still and dark, as if not a human being was alive in the city. And the two men, having assured themselves that all was still, took up the body, and bearing it between them a few paces down the street towards the church of Sant' Ambrogio, threw it into a well which still exists at that spot.

Then returning to the house, they continued to watch at the door, while the man whom Pippo had addressed as Nanni called to the two who had remained in the inner room :

"Is not your business done yet? It is time we were off! The street is as quiet as death. Come!"

"Bear a hand here, Nanni," returned Pippo. "You and Carlo carry the body—poor little thing! it is not heavy—to the same grave as the other. We are ready. Moro and I will close the door; and then to saddle!"

So the body of Caterina, wrapped as the other had been in a cloak, was carried out and thrown into the well; and the four men hurried off to seek

their horses at the inn behind the Palazzo Vecchio. And it was afterwards sworn by the ostler who had had charge of the horses, in the course of the police investigations to which these events gave rise, that one of the men carried a sack beneath his cloak, which he never quitted for a moment, but mounted with it in his hand, and placed it before him at his saddle-bow.

Once beyond the city gate, the men rode fast up the hill to the Villa Salviati. There at a small door in the garden-wall opening upon the little cypress grove, stood a woman in the deep shade, evidently anxiously waiting, despite the sharp cold. It was the Lady Veronica herself. The four men drew rein as they rode up to the little postern, and Pippo dismounted. The others took off their hats, but remained seated in their saddles.

"Speak!" said the duchess, in a short hoarse whisper.

"The orders of your ladyship have been punctually executed," returned Pippo.

"It is well! Give!" and she held out both hands towards the man.

"But my lady!" stammered Pippo, producing the sack from beneath his cloak, "shall I . . .?"

"Give! Quick!" returned the lady, passionately. She received in both hands the sack from the apparently unwilling hand of the trooper.

“Now, ride for your lives! Be beyond the Tuscan limits before the dawn. Away!”

The Lady Veronica ascended with firm steps to her chamber, greedily clutching the burden in the sack.

CHAPTER VII.

NEW YEAR'S DAY AT VILLA SALVIATI.

IT is New Year's morning in Villa Salviati, the greatest holiday of the year. What Christmas-day has always been among us in England, the first day of the year has been, and is still, among the nations of continental Europe. Then friendly ties are reknit, and presents and remembrances of all sorts are flying about in every direction. Then, among Roman Catholic communities, it is not only the first day of the year, but the first day of Carnival also; the period, more or less long, according to the fall of Easter, from the beginning of the year till the beginning of Lent, into which the social and religious habits and observances of Romish Christendom prescribe, that all the junketing, the feasting, the dancing, the pomp-and-vanity worshipping, and dissipation of the year shall be concentrated. The theory of carnival keeping is, that Momus, leading forth his gay procession of votaries on the first day of his reign in joyous, yet moderate and orderly mirth and jollity, continually beats the measure of

his mad dance quicker and quicker, as the pleasure weeks of the year slip on, until with a "sempre crescendo" movement, and grand finale crash, he brings them, in headlong career of frantic fun and universal licence, suddenly to a dead full stop on the sombre threshold of lententide, which neither he nor his crew may pass. Sharply the mad revellers are pulled up on their haunches. At mystic toll of bell in the small hours of that last night of revelry, sudden as the change in a phantasmagoria, the scene is shifted. The dancing mimes vanish; the preaching friars come in. Feasting is changed to fasting. Pomatum and powder give place to ashes and cowls. The world has had its fling. Now Heaven must have its turn. What has been done amiss according to rule and fashion, must now according to rule and fashion be wiped out by due penitential application, and all made straight. This is the orthodox theory and practice of carnival and lententide.

But Mother Church takes a part also in inaugurating the holiday season. The festival of the New Year commences with full-dress Church ceremonials, and ends with equally, but not more, full-dress balls. A great gathering at the palace, of magnificently embroidered coats, grand powdered perukes, jewelled stars, and crosses, collars and buckles, with more or less noble homunculi within or beneath them! Then all the duke's horses and

all the duke's men, and the serenest of highnesses himself, and all the court ladies, and all the court gentlemen, proceed in great state to the cathedral, and are received there by the archbishops, and the canons, and the vicars, and the deacons and the precentors, and postcentors, and the acolytes, and the little boys in scarlet gowns swinging their fragrant censers, all in their best array. And everybody bows to everybody else, bows to the right and bows to the left, and the soldiers line the huge nave, and "salute the host" by banging their firelocks on the pavement; and thus the year is well begun by a general performance of religious duties.

But for the nobles of the court circle this state procession to church, and the previous assembling at the grand-ducal palace is also a duty of etiquette towards the sovereign. It was "expected" that the grandees should pay their compliments personally on that day at the Pitti. And as the mass was at an early hour, and the reception at the palace consequently at one still more matutinal, and as Salviati had to go into the city from the villa, it behoved him to be afoot at a somewhat earlier hour than usual.

The servants at the villa, for their part, were all up and prepared for the great day, by times. Indeed, there was enough to be done. There was the great state carriage to be got out and prepared, and there were the six great state horses to be capari-

soned. And all this had to be done in duplicate—one great state carriage to convey his excellency the duke to the Pitti, and another great state carriage to carry her excellency the duchess. The same portentously clumsy “leathern conveniency” could not suffice for the pair—forbid it etiquette! A duke and duchess jog to court Darby-and-Joan-wise cheek-by-jowl! Faugh! And then all the spick-and-span new liveries, cumbrous with worsted lace, and silver lace, and gold lace, according to the rank of the wearer in the servants’ hall hierarchy, had to be fitted on. A special messenger, too, had to be despatched to the city early that morning. For my lord’s new gorgeously embroidered state coat had not come home overnight—the last possible moment being then, as even to the present day, deemed the best in Tuscany for the transaction of all such business. And there would have been trouble in the household if my lord duke had risen on the New Year’s morn, and demanding, as it was felt he naturally would, his new embroidered coat with his first waking words, were prevented from forthwith contemplating it.

Fortunately the magnificent garment, the fruit of many a long winter night’s vigil, during which weary eyes and skilful fingers had laboured at their dainty work, arrived, just as the silver-embossed hand-bell—(sold, very likely, at the Hôtel Droûot to some banker’s favourite sultana the other day)—which

stood by the duke's bedside, announced to expectant valetdom the fact of his waking. But behold! the change in Jacopo Salviati, which had occasioned so much speculation at court, produces its strange results to the minutely observant eyes of his servants also. His excellency's first thought on this New Year's morning of 1639 has not reference to his own personal adornment!

"Luigi!"

"Eccellenza! A happy new year to your lordship, and may every succeeding one outdo the felicity of its predecessor."

Luigi had got that up carefully overnight, under Francesca's tuition, in the servants' hall.

"Any pretty little compliment will do with my lord," said she. "You have an easy task with him, you gentlemen of the chamber. If the sun shines, and certain sunny eyes we wot of shine as brightly (and I don't think his lordship is likely to look into many sombre ones outside this weary villa), he is sure to be easily pleased. But, by all the saints, we women have a very different job with my lady."

"I declare," continued Luigi, "the sun is shining brighter, as is only natural, since your lordship has awaked."

"Very likely. The day grows older. I think I must recommend you at court, friend Luigi, for a lord in waiting; your talents in flattery are quite thrown away here. But, I want to know whether

the casket, that came home from the Ponte Vecchio* last night was sent off this morning according to my orders?"

"Eccellenza, it was."

"Has the messenger returned?"

"Not yet, my lord."

"How long is it since he started on his errand?"

"Nearly three hours, your excellency. He set off long before sunrise."

"Three hours! and the lazy dog is not here to give an account of his mission! Who took the packet?"

"Tonino, my lord, on the roan mare. But his orders were, according to your excellency's directions, to give the packet into no hands save those of the Lady Caterina herself. And it may well be that he had to await her rising."

"Humph! Caterina is not wont to be a laggard in the morning," he muttered to himself rather than to the servant; "and the sun has been up an hour or more. Maybe those rake-hells, Carlini and Serselli, kept the revel up late last night, and sweet Kate's pretty eyes are heavy this morning. When they did open, I flatter myself they brightened a little at the first New Year's gift they lit on. Pretty,

* The Ponte Vecchio is, and for centuries has been, the principal habitat in Florence of the jewellers and goldsmiths. The shops on the bridge are occupied by them almost exclusively.

sparkling eyes! How I can fancy them laughing back the sheen of the glittering stones as they flashed up at her from their black velvet bed. Ah! Messer Guido, choose as you may the most brilliant diamonds in all your stock, cut them and polish them as you will, they are no match for the eyes you have pitted them against. Your choicest pearls will but lose their colour against that skin. I think I see the pleased smile mantling over those full curved lips as she takes the baubles from their casket and tries the effect of them on that snowy neck and peerless brow. Luigi!"

"Eccellenza!"

"Run and see if Tonino has mayhap returned. I must have the answer from Casa Canacci before I go to court."

The New Year's gift which Salviati had sent to Caterina had been, indeed, a splendid one—a tiara and necklace, that might have paled with envy the cheek of a duchess. It had been intended to meet her eyes the first thing on the New Year's morning, and the giver was greedily impatient for his share of the pleasure in the receipt of her acknowledgments. A little word, moreover, was expected to accompany these acknowledgments, assenting to certain proposed arrangements for a meeting after Salviati should have discharged his duty to the grand-duke by appearing for as short a time as he could make it

at the state court-ball in the evening. The duke's unwillingness to start on the obligatory gala business of the day before getting the expected answer from Casa Canacci will, therefore, be readily appreciated.

"Eccellenza!" said Luigi, returning with the gorgeous new court coat in his hands, as if he hoped that the sight of it might divert his master's thoughts from the lagging Tonino's tardiness for a few minutes, "Tonino has not yet returned. Doubtless he will be here before your excellency can be dressed. Your excellency's new suit was sent home in good time this morning. I think, though it does not become me to judge, that no cavalier at the Pitti, let him be Strozzi, ay, or the grand-duke himself, will match that, this morning." The experienced valet held the glittering garment artistically, so that the sun's rays glistened and shimmered on the profusion of gold embroidery, encasing pearls and diamonds in its network, as he spoke.

"Good!" said Salviati, glancing at it without much attention, not that he was generally careless of such matters. But Salviati's mind was busy with yet more interesting thoughts.

"Well," said he, "I must get me dressed the while. I shall be late at the Pitti else. Has my lady duchess sent in my linen?"

"Not yet, my lord. I have not yet warned

my lady's women that your excellency was stirring."

It must be understood that amid all the gorgeousness of state and ostentatious magnificence characteristic of that period, no lady, however high in rank, if she cared duly to discharge the duties of her station as mistress of a household, would deem herself dispensed from giving her personal superintendence to the fine and costly tissues of linen and lace, which made so important and ornamental a part of the male costume of that day.

"Well, let la Francesca know that I shall be ready for the things presently. And, Luigi, tell Carlo to run to the brow of the hill and look out if he can see Tonino coming up the road. By the holy rood, if he has been letting the grass grow under his horse's hoofs, I will crop his ears for his pains."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the New Year's morning had opened on another scene in the apartments occupied by the duchess.

She had been up and dressed from the earliest dawn of day. Indeed, her women, cross enough despite the holiday face de rigueur appropriate to the festival, and their hopes of New Year's presents, at the strangely early call on their services, declared to each other that their lady

had not been in bed at all. Had she been spending the night in devotional exercises? May be! Who knows what maggot she will take into her troublesome head next? At all events, there is no sign of her prayers—if prayers they have been that have occupied her night—having brought her temper into a Christian frame. Truly, as Francesca had observed to Luigi, while the latter was waiting the summons to his master's chamber, truly her excellency's humours grew more cantankerous every day. There was no understanding her; and if things went on in this way much longer, she, Francesca Berti, should think of looking out for a service in some pleasanter and better regulated household. And now she wished anybody could tell her what was the meaning of it! There was her lady not dressed for court at all. There she was, dressed all in black, as if it were All Souls' Day instead of the New Year's morning.

In truth, the bearing and appearance of the Lady Veronica were little "like the time." When, at daybreak, she had summoned her women they found her already partially dressed; and the bed, though in some degree disarranged, showed signs of not having been slept in. There was a something, too, in the eye and face of the duchess which, although her women would have been at a loss to describe it, impressed them disagreeably. There was an expression of ferocity in the eye, mixed

with a kind of dreamy absence of manner, which was unlike her usual moody sombreness. Her first words, too, were strange and lugubrious.

“A happy New Year to your ladyship, and may the Holy Virgin and the saints give your excellency many such!” said Francesca, performing the recognised duty of the day, in the hope of receiving the usual largess.

“Oh, brava! Francesca,” returned the duchess, with a kind of sneering bitterness. “Many years to return like this, and many a New Year’s Day of similar colour and quality! What a charming wish! Girl, one such day as this is enough for a lifetime! There be pleasures, they say, which pall on repetition. Thy master sent a messenger to the city this morning. I would know if he has returned.”

“He has, my lady; and has brought with him the tailor, bearing his excellency’s new court dress—assuredly the richest and sweetest fashion that ever graced a noble gentleman. ’Tis——”

“Hold thy fool’s prating!” interrupted the duchess, fiercely. “Thy master sent a messenger this morning to Casa Canacci, in the Via dei Pilastri, and thou knowest well, girl, that it is of him I would speak. Has the messenger returned from Casa Canacci, I ask?”

“I know not, your ladyship! I will go and see,” replied Francesca, glad of an excuse to leave the presence of her mistress.

“A premature return of that man would spoil all!” muttered the duchess to herself, as soon as she was left alone. “But he will not return yet,” she continued, musingly; “there will be confusion and much talking over the nine days’ wonder. The gadding Tuscan will never resist the temptation of hearing everything that every wiseacre has to say on the matter, and adding his own contribution to the heap of lies no doubt already current. No, no! he will not return yet awhile. It is no use, Jacopo, to be in such a hurry for your messenger’s report—he will come time enough! Anxious to know how his pretty present was received! Faith, ’twas a nobly chosen gift! My offering, Jacopo, shall be as rare, ay, and as costly a gift as thine to thy love—thy dainty-featured, bright-eyed love! Sure all that loveliness is mirrored in thy fancy at this moment. So would I have it, Jacopo, my husband! I would have thy warm imagination filled with picturings of that exquisitely tinted cheek—how full of youth and health is the delicate peach-bloom! Is it not, Jacopo?—of that laughing eye! is it not in every beam eloquent of passionate love, as it answers glance for glance to thine own!—of the beautifully rounded spotless marble of that delicate neck! Does the circlet of pearls become it well, my husband?”

As she spoke, she extended both hands, as in imagination tendering some present for acceptance,

her body bent a little forward in humble attitude the while, and the face a little upraised. Ah! that face! surely a face to stamp its image on the brain of whoso looked on it, almost indelibly! The fierce ominous scowl on the lowering brow, and the lurid light in the bloodshot eyes, made such terrible contrast with the writhed sneering smile on the cold thin bloodless lips!

The girl Francesca returned to the room as the duchess was still standing in the attitude described. She was on the point of giving her answer respecting the errand on which she had been sent, but remained in speechless astonishment at the sight before her, thinking that the moody humours of her mistress had at length culminated in unmistakable insanity. Presently, the duchess turned towards Francesca, and said, after a moment of reflection:

“Ah! the man! the messenger to my lord’s . . . friends in Casa Canacci? Has he returned?”

“He has not, so please your excellency.”

“Well, so far! Is my lord yet stirring?”

“He is, my lady. Luigi has just come from his chamber. And, so please your ladyship, he says my lord is asking for his linen.”

“Well again! My lord shall be punctually served. Collar and sleeves, ruffles and wristbands, Holland linen and Flanders lace are all ready. Go

thou, Francesca, and bring hither the silver basket to lay them in."

The silver basket or dish, or large basin rather, which the duchess sent for, was a beautifully chiselled piece of plate, the work of a former century, much prized by several generations of the Salviati, and frequently used by the Lady Veronica for its present purpose.

"Am I not punctual," she muttered, as, once more left alone, she proceeded to take the fine linen and rich laces from their repository—"am I not punctual in each point of a good wife's duty? Lie lightly, snowy folds, and keep the secret of my New Year's offering, till Jacopo Salviati's own hand shall unveil the gift Veronica Cybo sends him!"

"Put the basin there, Francesca," she continued to the girl, who entered bringing it; "and go thou and bid Luigi ask if it be my lord's pleasure that I send his things forthwith."

Francesca again left the room more mystified than ever by the strangeness of her mistress's manner, and by the unnecessary message she was bidden to carry. Had she not already told the duchess that my lord was waiting to complete his toilette? She met Luigi returning from his second mission to ascertain if Tonino could be seen coming up the hill on his return from Casa Canacci.

"I wish," said he, "that rogue Tonino would make better speed when he is sent to the city. If

he don't mind what he is about, he will get dog's allowance from my lord when he does come. I never saw his excellency in such an impatience!"

"Ay!" returned Francesca, "one can understand *his* impatience for an answer from his innamorata; but what can one make of my mistress? She seems as anxious about Tonino's return as he is!"

"Why upon earth did you tell her anything about his going? Ah! women's tongues!"

"I never told her anything! What do you take me for? Do you think I don't know my place better than that?"

"How in the name of wonder did she find it out, then?"

"The saints only know how she found it out! But, I'll tell you what, Signor Luigi, I do believe that my lady is not in her right mind. You mark my words. The duchess will go mad one of these blessed days, if she is not mad at this moment, as I believe she is. I don't believe she has been in bed all night. She has not dressed for court, and no signs of her going to do it. Then she is all in black this morning, of all the days of the year! And now she has sent me to ask if my lord is ready for his linen. I have told her once that he is waiting for it!"

"Then go back to her ladyship, and tell her so again," rejoined Luigi. "Her excellency may go

to Bonifazio,* instead of going to court, if she thinks proper. But *we* must not be late at the Pitti this morning. Run along, Cecchina mia, there is a good girl, and let us have the things directly! There is no Tonino to be seen. And I must get my master dressed and off to court without his answer from la bella Caterina.”

Francesca returned to her mistress, and on entering her chamber found the linen and the lace for the duke's toilet all ready, and daintily laid out in the silver basin.

“So please your ladyship, my lord is waiting for his things.”

“And I am waiting to send them to him. See, Francesca, my child, all is ready prepared. Take the basin carefully, my girl. Bear it in both hands; thou wilt find it heavy. There is beneath the linen, a surprise for my lord, a New Year's present from his loving wife. Bear the basin deftly, girl. Nay, I will myself open the door for thee, and see thee safe to the door of my lord's chamber.”

Francesca lifted the heavy basin—so heavy as to set her marvelling greatly what the present could be which her strange and incomprehensible mistress had taken this odd method of conveying to her husband. Not jewellery, certainly. Simple cash? Solid dollars might, indeed, make the weight which

* The Florentine Bethlehem Hospital.

puzzled her. But it seemed hardly likely that the Lady Veronica could make a present of vulgar dollars to the duke. Perfumes?—some huge flask of essence, or some precious casket of unguent, the produce of the lady's chemistry and still-room industry? Ay! that seemed more likely.

"God send," thought Francesca to herself, as this explanation of the mystery occurred to her, "that my lady's chemistry be lawful, and her drugs wholesome. Were I Duke Jacopo, knowing all I know, I would none of any confection of hers."

So the basin, with the fair linen and the rich lace lying innocently and lightly on its surface, was borne in a sort of procession through the doors and passages between the lady's chamber and that occupied by the duke: the duchess holding wide the doors for her maid to pass, and escorting her on her way. Had she not adopted this precaution, it might have been safely predicted that Francesca's curiosity would have prompted her to examine her mysterious burden on the road, before bringing it to its destination.

Arrived at the door of the duke's chamber, the duchess tapped, and on being bidden by the voice of Luigi to enter, she so threw it open as to allow Francesca to pass without being seen herself. The door fell back into its place, leaving the duchess, pale as death, breathlessly listening on the outside of it.

“A prosperous and happy New Year, and many of them, to your excellency,” said Francesca, as she entered; I have brought your lordship’s linen, and my lady bids me say that she has sent your excellency a New Year’s gift at the bottom of the basin. What it may be, my lord, I know not, seeing that my lady herself placed the things as your lordship sees them, but ’tis something heavy to carry.”

“Thanks, my pretty Francesca, there’s a fee for thy good wishes not so heavy to carry back,” said Salviati, taking the pretty Abigail by the chin and giving her a kiss on the cheek. “But stay—something a little heavier must go with it this New Year’s morning. There’s for thy good wishes,” putting a gold piece into her hand; “now run and give my thanks and compliments to the duchess, and tell her we shall meet presently at court.”

And thus in lightsome mood the duke proceeded to complete his toilette.

First, on the top of the basin, lay lightly the large laced ruffles for his wristbands. These he lifted carefully, and started with a surprised and angry frown on seeing beneath them the voluminous and exquisitely fine muslin intended for his neck, stained with a large red spot on its snowy folds just in the centre of the basin.

“Ha! what’s this? some ill-timed jest!” he cried. “Luigi here, lift me this loathly cloth.

What have we of the Lady Veronica's sending beneath it?"

He spoke, his cheeks and lips growing pale with an unreasoned and undefined misgiving. Luigi, too, hesitated and turned pale as he put his hand to the blood-stained linen. After a moment's pause, he lifted it from the basin with a sudden twitch.

* * * * *

There, in the bottom of the basket, lay the head of Caterina Canacci. That lovely face, every smiling lineament of which had even at that moment been present to her lover's picturing fancy, so awfully the same, so awfully not the same!

It is on record that from that dreadful hour Jacopo Salviati never smiled again—never more had any part in the pleasure or the business of the world around him—and died a broken-hearted, prematurely aged wreck of man, while by count of years he should yet have been in the prime and flower of his life.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAJESTY OF THE LAW.

THE chronicle of the wrongs of Veronica, Duchess of Salviati, and of her memorable vengeance, has been completed, and there is little more to be told to complete this specimen of the Italian life of the seventeenth century. Yet, inasmuch as not even in Florence, under Ferdinand the Second, could such a series of facts pass wholly without external consequences, it is worth while to add another feature to the social picture, by briefly telling what those consequences were. The Via dei Pilastri, it will be remembered, was quite quiet in its total darkness, when the assassins escaped after the perpetration of the deed. Some alarm, indeed, seems to have been given, perhaps by the people of the house into which Serselli and Carlini escaped. But the police, as was then and there invariably the case, arrived when the malefactors were clear off from the scene of their crime. Shortly after their escape, "la Corte," as the chief police-officer and his men were strangely called, came with lights and bustling

noise up the Via dei Pilastrì—always with abundance of light and noise—to give due premonitory notice of their approach.

Bartolommeo Canacci, it will be remembered, had been left in the fatal house paralysed by terror and imbecility, and almost in a state of delirium. As soon, however, as the assassins had departed, carrying away with them the most frightful of the evidences of their crime, and the house remained in dead stillness, with the exception of the helpless wailing, which from time to time came from the chamber of old Giustino, Bartolommeo's excess of terror had subsided. As soon as he ascertained that in truth he and his bedridden old father were the only living beings remaining in the house, thoughts of turning the occasion to his own advantage began to arise in his mind. And when the officers of justice entered, he was found rifling the coffers in the old man's chamber, heedless of his mingled entreaties and imprecations.

It was a matter of course, according to the traditions of the Florentine police, that both these, the evidently helpless father, as well as the presumptively guilty son, should be arrested. Nor did the zeal of the "Bargello"* and his officers cease there in a matter the scandal of which was the talk of every tongue, gentle and simple, in

* The chief of the Florentine police, as well as the prison over which he presided, was so called.

Florence. Several other relatives of the unfortunate family, with their wives and families, some of them resident in villas at a distance from Florence, were arrested and lodged in the Bargello. Of course nobody, official or unofficial, had the slightest idea that these unhappy people were in any way guilty of the horrible crime, but it was desirable that something should be done, and some activity manifested. And although the real authoress of the crime, and the motive of it, were well known, it was especially necessary that "Justice" should not presume to lay her hand on personages placed so far above her. It was necessary, also, or at least decent and desirable, that, although in fact the truth of the matter was no mystery, the city and the authorities should pretend to know something very different. One "procès-verbal" accordingly was drawn up containing a true account of the facts of the case as far as they could be known; and a second fictitious one, in which nothing was suffered to appear derogatory in any way to "persons of condition." The first document was sedulously locked away from the light of day among the secret archives of the court, in company with much else which it was fondly hoped would never be exposed to the public eye. The second was given to the world as the result of the most accurate investigation that justice could make into the history of so monstrous an enormity.

The depositions of the Signori Carlini and Serselli were also taken. They related what they had seen in the Casa Canacci, and afterwards from the window of the adjoining house. Of course their evidence criminated no one on whom the police could lay hands except the wretched Bartolommeo. It was proved that the assassins who had entered the house had obtained access to it by his means, and had come in in his company. In a short time—as it seems to have appeared to the Florentine public of that day; that is to say, in a few months—the unfortunate old man was allowed to return to his own bed to die, and the other manifestly innocent members of the family were liberated. But Bartolommeo, and a brother of his, who appears to have had nothing whatever to do in the matter from first to last, were tortured. And the agony of the rack soon forced from Bartolommeo a complete confession of the whole circumstances of the conspiracy and the crime. This confession, of course, could not be suffered to reach the public. But it sufficed to furnish the majesty of the law with the victim which was needed for its decorum, and for the finishing of the affair with a proper and satisfactory coup de théâtre.

Bartolommeo was, to a certain extent, guilty. Possibly he was not altogether the dupe of the story the duchess had told him, as to the scope of her vengeance. At all events, he was guilty of

being caught in the act of rifling his father's coffers. And the majesty of the law accordingly took his life with a very tranquil conscience. On the 27th of November, 1639, he was beheaded in that blood-saturated old court-yard of the Bargello, nearly a year after the committal of the crime.

Many prayers, and the intercession of powerful mediators, were employed to induce Salviati to pardon and become reconciled to the Lady Veronica. But they were all in vain. Reiterated supplications from the duchess reached him. Strong remonstrances were addressed to him by the Prince Carlo, her father, by the cardinals of the family—Alderano and Odoardo—by Ricciarda Gonzaga, and by other connections. Many of the ruling sovereigns of Italy endeavoured to influence him.

Even the pontiff, Innocent the Eleventh, used his authority in favour of so highly connected a murderess. But Salviati was inflexible in his determination never again to see the woman whose ruthless deed had desolated his life and heart. He never did see her again after that fatal New Year's morning. He died, unforgiving and broken-hearted.

The lot of the Duchess Veronica was a different one. She lived to a great age, residing chiefly at Massa. She became (as might have been foreseen)

exemplarily religious in her life; and at her death was deemed little less than a canonised saint by all the population of the small territory of her family.

THE LOTTERY DREAMER.

CHAPTER I.

THE MERENDA.

THE “*Cascine*,” as all know well who have done their Italy, are the delight of the “upper ten” (*hundred*) at Florence. The word, which is the plural form of *Cascina*, literally a cheese meadow, may be rendered by our phrase, a dairy farm. And the lovely spot in question was, in fact, the Grand-Duke’s dairy farm. There the richest milk and the best butter were to be had by all, who were willing to pay a higher price than the ordinary market rate for those luxuries, and who were also content to go some mile or so beyond the city gate in search of them. The past tense, indeed, need only be used as regards the ownership. For I have not heard that our Tuscan revolution in any wise disturbed the cows at their pasture, or turned

the milk sour in the well-appointed dairy. So our "upper ten" take their evening drives as usual; those who think with Rousseau, that no dainties are so delicious as dairy dainties, still find cream and butter forthcoming in return for the accustomed pauls, and the Cascine are still as beautiful as ever, though no longer grand-ducal.

Few cities possess so delightful a public pleasure-ground as our Florentine dairy-farm. For driving, riding, walking, sitting, or lounging away a summer hour in the deep shadow of a forest glade, the Cascine are unrivalled.

Occupying a strip of ground immediately outside the city gates, about three miles or so in length, bounded on the south by the Arno, and on the north by the little stream of the Mugnone, which falls into the former river at the farther end of it, the inclosed space comprises every variety of combination of meadow and woodland. A well-kept walk along the bank of the Arno, well fenced in from the winds sweeping down from the Apennines to the north by a magnificent high hedge of laurustinus, bay, and arbutus, and commanding the most picturesque peeps of the domes and towers of the city, framed in openings among the forest trees, offers as luxurious a winter's walk as can well be imagined. Soft sandy alleys cut in the forest, and appropriated especially to equestrians, present a ground for a

gallop that "Nimrod" himself would have approved of. A good road around the whole space now skirting the greenest coppice-embowered meadows, now plunging amid thick shady woods, and now again commanding a view of that lower range of the Apennine which shuts in the happy valley called after the Arno, makes a rarely equalled drive. There is no describing, without the aid of brush and palette and a right skilful hand to use them, the exceeding beauty of the view towards this mountain range, especially about the hour of an autumnal sunset. Passing over the strip of highly cultivated and rich alluvial flat which forms the bottom of the Val d'Arno, the eye is charmed with the extraordinary multitude of villas, with their surrounding trees and gardens, which stud the lower slopes of the hills. These are the abounding evidences of the luxury and wealth of the ante-ducal days of Florence, which so struck Ariosto by their number as to lead him to say, that if Florence could gather them within her walls, she would be equal to two such cities as Rome. Above these rises the range of hills which, under the names of Monte Morello, Monte Acuto, and the Mugello Hills, forms the barrier of the Val d'Arno. At the hour I have named they are all bathed in a rose-coloured bloom, gradually deepening into purple plum colour, as the short southern twilight dies away; and then

whitening into pale ghosts of mountains, as the moon rises over the slender tower of Fiesole on its saddle-backed hill to the right, and far away in the same direction, over the dark pine forests of Vallombrosa, the sombre darkness of which sullenly refuses to smile beneath the pale ray like every neighbour hill around.

But before the last of these phantasmagoric changes has taken place, the band that has been playing among the rhododendron clumps in front of the handsome range of buildings containing all the dairy accommodation and appurtenances, has finished the last favourite bit from Verdi's last opera, and the last lingering carriage of all the closely-packed crowd drawn up in the open gravelled area between the building and the band has moved off towards the city. 'Tis the mode with the cosmopolite Florentine "upper ten" to halt in the spot described, after their drive for half an hour or so, before returning to the city. Some like to listen to the music, many enjoy the cool evening air blowing down from the hills. Almost all love dearly the polyglot flirting at carriage-doors and windows, most conveniently and amicably performed when a dismounted cavalier is stationed on either side of a carriage containing two fair dames. All feel the absolute necessity of remaining in the spot, where fashion has decreed that it is at that hour essential to be found. So

it often occurs that thinly-clad belles, who have been yielding to one or all of these temptations, may be seen gathering handkerchiefs and scarfs closely around delicate throats, while they are carried off through the darkening avenues at a sharp trot. For our Cascine, with all its unrivalled charms, has, truth to tell, the reputation of being not wholly salubrious during the first hour after sunset. A light fleecy mist may at such times be observed to settle down upon it, while Florence and the neighbouring hills are as free from damp as at mid-day. The bright emerald green of the meadows hints that all the advantages of different climates cannot be perfectly combined. And it unfortunately happens in this, as in some other cases, that the sanitary laws and those of "*la mode*," taking no cognisance whatever of each other's edicts, are apt to be a little at variance on the subject of evening drives to the Cascine.

But despite the habits of fashion the social life of Florence is, perhaps, the least aristocratically exclusive of any to be found in the cities of Europe. There is even still deep down at the bottom of the national character a foundation of republican sentiment, surviving from the grand old days when Florence was said to be "*the most republican of all republics*," which very perceptibly modifies the manners and ways of the people. "*Nobili*" and "*Snobili*" are right classical Tuscan terms. Yet

the division signified by them is a more impassable one on the banks of the Thames than on those of the Arno. Accordingly, we have no Hyde Park for the one class, and Victoria Park for the other. Our beautiful Cascine serves for all. And the working people of both races are quite as alive to its charm, quite as fond of enjoying it, quite as anxious to make themselves smart for the occasion of doing so, and often—taking into consideration the advantages imparted to a Manchester cotton-print by a lithe figure, and the disadvantages inflicted by a dowdy one on a French muslin—quite as successful in achieving that end.

But, although holidays are by no means such rare things in Florence as they are in London, still every day is not a holiday. Some are only half-holidays. There are even a few which are not holidays at all. And the snobile population, for the most part, limits its Cascine gaieties to those which are. Nor for that reason, it is to be observed, do the non-working classes at all take it into their heads that pleasure-seeking becomes thereby “Vulgar” on a holiday. On the contrary, the same days which witness the greatest concourse of plebeians in all sorts of places of resort for the purpose of recreation, witness also an increase of the throng of patricians.

But there are certain days in the year when the true cockney Florentine especially makes a point

of visiting the Cascine. It is in the prime of the early summer, in May, that the working world of Florence make their great Cascine holiday. A "merenda," or luncheon to be eaten in the southern meadow on the bank of the Arno, is the great enjoyment looked forward to, and the object, in many cases, of weeks of previous careful saving and scraping.

It is one of the very rare occasions on which eating and drinking enters into the plan of popular Florentine holiday-making. But very little out of the little that the working classes can spend, or ought, beyond the bare necessities of life, goes on what we northerns especially designate as creature-comforts. The theatre, cigars, a drive in a hackney-coach, six inside, the lottery, and dress, have all prior claims to the stomach. In no community in Europe, probably, is so large a proportion of the income of the entire society spent in dress as in Florence. The northern visitor, whose eye has been attracted by a pretty face at the window of a humble tenement, with its magnificent raven tresses most artistically dressed, and a finely-shaped bust encased in a snow-white and well-fitting bodice, could never imagine, that the reason why the fair one thus contented herself with exhibiting half her pretty person at the window instead of showing the whole of it among the holiday crowd in the streets, consisted in the

dire impossibility of accomplishing a presentable toilette for more than one half of herself.

In a fish-tail ends the form so fair above,

says Horace, speaking of a mermaid; and the case in question is almost as distressing :

In a bedgown ends the form so fair above.

At all events, Laura Vanni, the daughter of old Laudadio Vanni, the jeweller and goldsmith on the Ponte Vecchio, was as good a girl as a good man could wish to make a wife of, and as good a daughter as her father could desire, and very much better than he deserved. And yet, had it entered the old man's head to propose to her that any portion of her habiliments should be contrived with a view to disfiguring rather than enhancing the advantages of face and figure with which nature had endowed her, it is probable that an absurdity so monstrous in her eyes would have made a rebel of her. That it should be enjoined on her by any of the higher duties or sanctions, that she should make herself appear less beautiful than she might do, would have been so new, so unheard-of, so utterly incomprehensible to her, that it would have been a hopeless task to introduce such an idea into her brain.

Heaven knows her little toilette was simple

enough on the morning on which I wish to present her to the reader, as she walked with her father and a couple of other individuals, to their annual festival in the Cascine. She had a plain white dress of some far from costly material, with a simple broad hem at the bottom—a *skirt* I believe I should say, for I mean only to speak of that part of it which robed her from the waist downwards. It was simple and cheap; but it was made of modest amplitude, and was irreproachably washed, starched, and ironed. Her bust to the waist was dressed in a black silk jacket, open in front so as to show a bit of worked muslin of the form of an inverted pyramid, extending downward to within an inch of the sash at the waist. This bodice also was quite plain. But it set to perfection on the rich contours of her figure. Large heavy bands of dark brown wavy hair were skilfully arranged on either side of her face, and were surmounted by one of those coquettish dark brown hats which are assuredly the most becoming head-gear that fashion has yet invented for the young and pretty; though many of those who are both are silly enough to let themselves be cheated out of the use of it by the stupid declaration of those who are neither, that it is “vulgar,” only because the simplicity and easy cost of it place it within the reach of many.

And now how can I give an idea of the face

that was beneath the hat, and between the bands of hair? It was a face of the veritable Florentine type, with smaller features, more delicately chiselled, more expressive of intelligence, more mobile, than Roman female beauty. There was none of the massive dignity and harmonious repose of the Roman type of loveliness. A much larger portion of the charm of the Tuscan girl depended on the soul within, expressing its meanings through the large well-opened clear grey eyes, and in the constant play of the lines of the mouth. Altogether, there was less of purely animal perfection. The type of countenance was the product of a race that had passed through many generations of a higher civilisation than modern Rome has achieved. The delicately-formed rounded little chin, with its dimple in the middle, was somewhat prominent. The mouth beautifully shaped, and capable of an infinity of varying expression. The lips might perhaps have been called too thin, and might have been held to indicate that form would be considered more important than colour. The nose small, thin, and straight, but the least in the world *retroussée*. The great grey eyes were exceptional in a model Florentine head, and seemed to indicate that a rill of northern blood had in some antecedent generation been mingled with that of Laura Vanni's Tuscan forefathers. The eyebrows above these remarkable eyes were straight and strongly

marked, and the brow was slightly projecting. The forehead, of very fair height, was rounded rather than straight, and indicated an organisation in which the perceptive faculties were more strongly developed than the purely intellectual ones.

Three male companions were escorting pretty Laura to the Cascine. Of these, two seniors walked together in front. One was old Laudadio Vanni, and the other his intimate friend and gossip, and Laura's godfather, the Cavaliere Niccolo Sestini, who, having as a clerk in some one of the innumerable public offices spent his life till sixty years of age in doing as nearly as possible nothing, was now in the enjoyment of a pension of some eightpence a day, and of the felicity of having nothing *whatever* to do from morning till night. He had possessed this happiness for the last ten years, and still deemed his lot a most enviable one. He was a bachelor, and his friend Vanni a widower of many years' standing. In appearance the two old men were singularly contrasted. The cavaliere was a short, fat, roundabout little man, with a head shaped like the large end of an egg, and a skull as bald as an egg-shell; rosy fat cheeks, from which every vestige of whisker, beard, or moustache was scrupulously shaven; and a face utterly void of any expression save that of profound contentment and placidity.

The old jeweller, Laudadio Vanni, was a very much more remarkable-looking man. His unusually tall and strangely-slender figure was alone sufficient to attract attention; but the impression produced by it was exceedingly enhanced by an abundance of long straggling locks of silvery whiteness, which were blown about by the breeze as he walked, carrying his hat in his hand, and by an ample and flowing beard of the same hue. But the singular expression of his face was needed to complete the portrait, which the memory of those who saw him rarely failed to retain. It was long, narrow, and emaciated as his body. The forehead was higher and straighter than his daughter's, but much narrower, and remarkably pinched about the temples. But the eye was what gave the whole face its peculiar and striking expression. It was the same large clear grey eye that Laura had, scarcely dimmed by old Laudadio's eight-and-seventy years, but with a strange wildness and eagerness of expression that seemed to impart something almost "uncanny" to the physiognomy. The head might have been taken as a model for that of some rapt Ossianic bard, had it not been that there was a certain meanness about the lines of the mouth and in the expression of the narrow retiring forehead that would have been inconsistent with the idea. The old man stooped a little, not at the shoulders, but at the hips; and the attitude

thus given to his body, joined to the slight protrusion of the chin, caused by the habitual rectification of the stoop, gave an air of restless anxiety to the figure which was very striking.

The fourth member of the party was, like old Vanni, a goldsmith and jeweller; but, though he had reached his five-and-thirtieth year, he was not yet master of a shop and business of his own. A better workman at his art than Carlo Bardi could not be found in Florence, and that is saying a great deal. Nor could there have been found a more thrifty man, which, as these are especially Florentine virtues, is saying much more. But Carlo had been unfortunate—had been obliged to support entirely a sickly sister, and pay the debts of a worthless brother. Both these had now been dead some years, however, and Carlo was once again beginning to hope that he should achieve the establishment of a shop and business, of his own, and fulfil the almost equally long-deferred hope of making Laura Vanni his wife. It was quite understood between them long ago that the hope was mutual; and their talk, as arm in arm they followed the two old men along the path by the bank of the Arno, was accordingly more of material interests, and less of the pleasant nonsense of love-making, than might have been the case some eight or ten years before. For Laura, I am shocked to say, had reached her seven-and-twentieth year.

When they reached the favourite meadow selected by the Florentines for the annual celebration of their “merenda” festival, the ground was almost entirely occupied by parties of four or five, or sometimes ten or twelve, covering with their clean white cloths, pitched in most unexclusive neighbourhood to each other, nearly the whole turf. The porter hired for the occasion, who had been sent on with the materials of our friends’ “merenda,” had selected for them what he deemed a desirable spot. But the old cavaliere was not so easily contented. One place was exposed to the wind from the hills, another would be in the full sun in half an hour; a third did not command a view of the “palazzo vecchio” tower; and he had eaten his “merenda” in sight of that every Ascension-day for the last ten years. His old friend the while took no part in his search for a spot to suit him, but seemed, with his strange eager look, intently occupied in counting the numbers of the different parties on the ground around—counting the men, counting the women (for almost every knot was composed of family parties)—counting everything he could see, and all with an appearance of the strangest interest.

At last, old Niccolo—“Il Cavaliere,” as his friend Vanni never failed to call him—found a spot to his liking; and the little party seated themselves on the grass, and made the necessary preparations

for their feast. It cannot be said that the cavaliere's choice of a locality was a bad one. It was close under the thick tall hedge that forms the boundary of the meadow farthest from the city. The river was thus on their left; the meadows crowded with the holiday-makers, and the more or less pretentious and luxurious preparations for eating and drinking, with the towers and domes of the city in the distance, in front of them; and the thick woods of the Cascine, and above and beyond these the hill of Fiesole, with its tower and its villas, to the right.

Laura drew forth from their store a clean white cloth, and four very coarse, but nicely washed, napkins; while the cavaliere was ascertaining that the flasks of wine had travelled safely in the basket made expressly for the purpose of carrying a couple of Florentine flasks, and consisting of two circular receptacles some nine inches in diameter, and as much in depth, joined together at one point of their circumference, and surmounted by a semicircular handle. Such a contrivance is needed for moving the fragile egg-shell-like flasks, which enter so largely into Tuscan domestic use. Flasks for wine, flasks for oil, flasks for milk, flasks for medicine, flasks for water. The legal Florence flask contains seven pounds' weight of wine, and is equal to nearly three ordinary bottles. But the glass is of the very thinnest; and even the baskets

described above would fail in securing their large bulging sides and long slender necks from frequent breakage, were they not invariably covered with a rush-work coat as high as the shoulder. The neck, which ends without any rim, and looks just as if it had been irregularly broken off, is so slender, that corking it in our fashion is out of the question. The Florentine, therefore, when he has filled his wine-flask, pours into the narrow neck a little drop of olive oil, which, resting on the wine to the thickness of about half an inch, effectually and hermetically closes the aperture. A wisp of straw, or, oftener still, a vine-leaf, loosely placed in the mouth of the opening, serves to keep out flies, dust, and such matters; and the flasks, which of course remain always upright on their rush-plaited bottoms, may stay thus for years. When wanted, a morsel of wool or cotton thrust into the neck of the flask readily absorbs the oil, which is thus removed; or, without any such contrivance, a practised Florentine hand will toss the oil out with a jerk, without spilling a drop of the wine.

"There!" said the cavaliere, "those ought to be a couple of flasks of as good Pomino as you would wish to drink. I went to the bishop's cellar for them myself yesterday."

"Red wine—that gives me the number 33. I wanted my third number!" muttered old Vanni; "a very remarkable combination."

"Does all the Pomino vineyard belong to the Bishop of Fiesole?" asked Carlo.

"All," replied Signor Sestini; "but the worst of it is, that the bishop has other farms besides, on which he makes a very inferior wine; and his lordship is just as apt to mix his flasks, and cheat his customers, as any wineshop-keeper in Florence."

"Bishop is number 32!" cried Vanni; "very curious indeed."

Laura had by this time spread the cloth, and produced a long loaf of brownish bread, two feet or near it in length, by four inches in width, and three in height; a quantity of "Salame," or Bologna sausage, uncooked, thinly sliced, and wrapped in abundance of fresh vine-leaves; some salad; a quarter of roast lamb—the grand dish of the repast—about as large as a good-sized quarter of rabbit; and some apples.

The fat little cavaliere and ex-clerk fell to at once; and the young people followed his example. But old Laudadio's head was still running meditatively on his numbers.

"The three objects of discourse that first spontaneously strike your mind, and take your attention," said he, more to himself than to his companions; "certainly they were the red wine, the bishop, and the apples. Why did my mind fix on those in preference to all the other things spoken of? Aha!

there is the force of the cabala. I multiply the number of the first object by that of the second, and thus get 1050. I multiply this again by the number of the third, and this gives me 2100."

"But what is the connection," said Carlo, with something almost like a groan, "between red wine and the number 33, or between a bishop and number 32?"

"What is the connection," returned the old man, sharply; "does not every one know that there is a profound and mystical relation between certain numbers and every object in nature and art, and every act which a man can do? Are they not recorded in the book which contains the result of the life-long labours of the greatest sages of the generations past?" And putting his hand in the pocket of the threadbare old long frock-coat, which hung loosely on his attenuated figure as on a clothes-horse, he pulled forth a dirty, greasy, and well-thumbed volume, entitled "*Fortune for all Men. A Book of Dreams for Players in the Lottery. The last improved edition, published at Florence, in 1858.*" "Here," said he, laying his tremulous hand reverently on the book, "here is the connection, friend Carlo;" and proceeding hurriedly to refer to his oracle, he turned to a kind of dictionary of all sorts of objects, names, and actions, which occupied one hundred and eighty-six out of its two hundred and fifty-

six pages, and pointed to the above-mentioned numbers appended to the objects in question. "Ah! the science of numbers is a great and wonderful science!" said he.

"But to think of your knowing the numbers denoted by the red wine, the bishop, and the apples, without turning to the book!" said the old cavaliere, with evident admiration. "Ah, my friend, what a head! what a mind you have!"

"Why papa knows every number in the list, I do believe," said Laura, laying her hand on the old man's silver locks, as he sat beside her, and kissing him on the forehead; "few know as much of the cabala as papa does."

"Few have studied them, perhaps, as profoundly and as long," returned he, with the mock humility of gratified vanity. "But, alas! Art is long, and the longest life short."

"The longest life would indeed be too short, I fear, to reach the goal of your studies, Signor Vanni," said Carlo, not without bitterness.

"Who knows!" cried the old man, fiercely. "Who knows when the reward may come to the watchful and unwearied student—come in a moment, suddenly, unexpectedly, rich and abundant! 2100, I said. Multiply this by the number of the current year, add the golden number, and with the product form the pyramid of the great Rutilio of Calabria. Take the second line of it

for your first number, the two figures at the right hand of the base for your second, and the two figures at the left hand for your third number; place these beneath your pillow at night; and, should you dream of them, the result is sure;—almost sure,” added the old dreamer, with a long-drawn sigh.

The cavaliere, meanwhile, was doing great execution among the eatables; and it was not till the last diminutive bone of the cat-like lamb was picked, that he lit his cigar, and soon afterwards fell asleep in perfect beatitude smoking it. The old jeweller ate very sparingly, and fell to conning his book, and doing endless multiplications and additions. The lovers, of course, were happy, and busy in talk of their hopes of shortly accomplishing the long-awaited-for marriage. And thus the merenda lasted far into the afternoon; and it was nearly sunset when the little party started to walk by the river-bank to Florence.

CHAPTER II.

THE JEWELLER AND THE JEWELLER'S DAUGHTER.

ON Tuscany, and on the dynasty of Lorraine, must rest the disgrace of having first given to Europe the evil example of a government exciting and pandering to the most pernicious and antisocial vices of its people, by making gambling a national vice. The lottery, as a means of revenue, was first introduced there in 1740, shortly after the death of the last Medicean duke. Something of the kind had previously existed in the republic of Genoa. It was said to have arisen there from a system of betting on the different candidates for the various magistracies to be elected by ballot; and it was in its early days known as the "Genoa Lottery." But it was at Florence that the lottery became a systematised means of duping and plundering the people. From Florence it passed to Vienna. France eagerly seized on the new invention. England, as we know, permitted state needs to override the perfectly understood, but deliberately disregarded, principles of state morality. To

Frederick the Great belongs the honour of having resisted the temptation, and strictly forbidden the introduction of the abomination into his states. In proportion as the different countries have advanced in moral civilisation, they have discountenanced and abolished their lotteries. In Italy, as might be expected, the system still continues in full vigour. Rome, struck at first sight by the immorality of the thing—but not at first sight comprehending the profit to be drawn from it—began by anathematising the lottery, but pocketed its infallibility and adopted it, immediately on perceiving its real object and value.

In Central Italy, the Grand-Duke of Tuscany and the Father of the Faithful were partners in keeping the public hell for their respective subjects. And by this arrangement the lottery drawing in the various Tuscan cities served the Pope for continually “making the game” with his “children;” while that at Rome assisted the grand-duke in like manner. It is understood that the immoral and disreputable keepers of the gambling-tables at Baden-Baden and Homburg have chances in the games played to the extent of five per cent. against the players, who are perfectly well aware of that fact. But the amount of “the pull” which his Highness the Duke and his Holiness the Pope permitted themselves against their subjects, was, as near as may be, seventeen per cent.

The "game is made, gentlemen," in this wise: The drawing takes place every week in one or other of the different cities, more or less frequently in each in proportion to their size and importance, according to a regular fixed cycle. This change in the locality of the drawing has no other object or effect than to give each place in turn a share of the amusement of seeing the ceremony. The offices are always open in all the towns, and a man at Rome may play on the drawing to take place at Florence, or vice versâ, just as well as if the drawing were to be performed in his own city. The numbers put into the wheel are always from one to ninety inclusively. From these, five are drawn. The player, therefore, bets that such or such a number will be drawn.

When the drawing is to take place, a scaffolding, handsomely ornamented with upholstery, is raised in one of the most conspicuous spots in the city, and a band of music is provided. Three magistrates attend in their robes of office; the wheel is placed before them at the front of the platform, and a boy stands beside it. The numbers are called aloud by one of the magistrates, held up to the sight of the people, then passed from one of them to the other two successively, and lastly to the boy, who drops them, one by one, into the wheel. Two or three turns of the machine mixes them well up together; and the boy proceeds to

take out one. It is handed to the presiding magistrate, who calls it aloud, shows it to the crowd, and then affixes it in large figures to a board provided for the purpose. Then comes a flourish of music; and so on, till the five numbers have been drawn. They are immediately put up conspicuously in all the lottery offices; they are communicated as quickly as possible to the other cities; and the fortunate holders of them, if there be any such—for it will be observed that by this system it by no means follows that there will be any prizes to pay at all—present their tickets for payment at any of the offices.

It is difficult to give an adequate idea of the degree to which the lottery occupies the thoughts of the Tuscan populace, or of the largeness of the place it holds in their daily life. It has even modified their language. Expressions, allusions, metaphors drawn from it, have become part of their household speech. The walls and pavements throughout the city are always scrawled over with numbers, generally in combinations of three or five. It is a constant subject of conversation; and if a working man has occasion to put his hand into his miscellaneous filled pocket, the chances are, that you may see him pull out, among other matters, one of the abominable little strips of coarse grey-blue paper which constitute the tickets in the lottery. Hawkers, crying their special numbers,

may constantly be heard in the street. A ticket may be bought for a sum somewhat less than a penny; and the mendicant risk his alms in preference to buying himself a bit of bread. Many and many of the poorest classes play every week; and there is always an especial run on the government pawnbroking establishment a few hours previous to the closing of the sale of tickets.

Hell's darksome gate stands night and day agape,
says the Latin poet.

A confirmed lottery-player is to a Tuscan family almost as fatal a cause of misery and ruin as a confirmed gin-drinker is to an English hearth. And the reader will be prepared to find that the home to which we left Laudadio Vanni and his daughter Laura returning, after their day's holiday at the Cascine, was not a prosperous one. Yet, had it not been for the curse that was on the old man, there were reasons why it ought to have been both. Laudadio Vanni had once been celebrated in the little world of Florence for his talent in his art. Ideas which have once become a portion of the popular mind in any country are endowed with a wonderful vitality. The goldsmith's art in the palmy days of Florence—from the old time when Giotto drew the perfect circle without compass as he sat at his work-bench, to the later generation when Cellini delighted Europe with the elegance of

his fancy and the daintiness of his handiwork—was one of the fine arts. The statue of that unrivalled art-workman stands among the great ones—poets, painters, sculptors, statesmen, and captains—whom Florence still delights to honour; and his works are among the undying possessions which still bring the lovers and students of art as pilgrims to its shrine in Florence, from every part of the civilised world. And to the Florentine mind the cunning and tasteful worker in gold and its combinations is still an artist.

And Laudadio Vanni was held to have caught more of the ancient spirit and traditions of Florentine art than any of his contemporaries. If a restoration was needed of some treasured relic of former magnificence, no eye was so sure as Vanni's to comprehend the feeling of the original design, and no hand so capable of equalling the original workmanship. If a stranger needed a fitting setting for some gem of mediæval art, the acquisition of which was the main triumph of his tour, Vanni was the man to whom he was recommended. His was the shop on the Ponte Vecchio which travellers in search of some memorial of their stay at Florence especially sought out. And all this ought to have "led on to fortune." More especially as the old widower's only daughter from an early age began to prove herself a very valuable assistant to him.

Laura Vanni was indeed a born artist. Had the circumstances of her position put it within her reach, she would have undoubtedly excelled in some one of the higher branches of art creation. She had striven hard, and had effected much, towards retarding her father's downhill path on the road to ruin. Her talent had made itself known; her designs were sought; and the old shop on the Ponte Vecchio had a new attraction added to it. But the evil spirit she had to fight against was too strong for her; and gradually things went from bad to worse. A precarious hand-to-mouth struggle with difficulties drove them to substitute mere manufacture for the slower process of artistic elaboration. Visitors who sought the shop in the expectation of finding some charming *chef-d'œuvre* of grace and fancy, found only the ordinary bunches of turquoises and garnets and pearls, which made the staple of every shop on the bridge. The display even of these soon began to be scantier and shabbier than those of their neighbours and rivals. It was not only that the old man neglected his business, and did nothing, being wholly absorbed in cabalistic calculations, and endless searches for fortunate numbers from every object in life and in nature. Had this been the worst, Laura, by her own industry and talent, and with the true-hearted help of her faithful friend and patient lover, Carlo Bardi, might have managed to keep the old man and

herself without any assistance from him. Carlo would willingly have installed himself as the old jeweller's assistant and workman, and have served his seven or twice seven years for his love, had such a scheme promised any good issue. It had often been talked over between them, and as often abandoned as hopeless. For old Laudadio was in the habit of pilfering from his own shop to supply the means of gratifying his passion. Any chance suggestion of a combination of numbers to his diseased brain was sure to be followed by the abstraction of a brooch or a bracelet; and a dream was a sentence of sacrifice under cost price of the most valuable article in the shop.

It will be seen that poor Laura's task was an up-hill one, and her position sufficiently hard. Without the frequent and always ungrudgingly bestowed assistance of her godfather, the cavaliere ex-clerk, old Sestini, it would have been impossible for her to have got on from one year's end to another. But it was curious enough, that though old Niccolo was held by all who knew him to be a fool, though he seemed, in truth, not to have two ideas on any subject under the sun, and, still more strangely, though he always testified the utmost admiration for his friend Laudadio's profound cabalistic science, yet some species of instinct with regard to the side on which his own bread was buttered, prevented him from ever risking a

farthing in the lottery himself, and also led him so to manage his benefactions to Laura, as that they should always reach her hands just when needed to meet some special pressure, and should never find their way into those of his profoundly mathematical friend.

Under these circumstances, it would seem that pretty Laura Vanni must have been among the many victims who have cause to hate the paternal institution of the lottery as the one cause of all their sorrow in life. How numerous must be the victims ruined by the fatal passion in those on whom they depend! Yet no such feeling is common among the people, even among those who are themselves free from the lust of gambling. And Laura herself had no such feeling on the subject. It was not only that her affection for her father was in no wise diminished by his conduct, but she did not seem to feel either hatred or anger against the thing itself.

While the old shop on the bridge was becoming stripped, and things were getting worse and worse with Laura and her poor old incorrigible father, worthy Carlo Bardi was slowly making his way up fortune's hill. By rigid economy and hard work as a journeyman jeweller, he had contrived to save a sum which at last placed him in a position to make a proposal he had been long meditating. This was nothing less than that Laudadio should

give up the shop and business to him, that he and Laura should forthwith be married, and that he should charge himself with finding the old man a home and maintenance during the remainder of his days. The business had, in fact, become worth nothing, and the shop was as nearly as possible bare. Nevertheless, Carlo hoped to be able to stock it with his little capital, and by his own industry and skill, and his wife's talent and taste, to recover in some degree its old credit. It was a bold scheme, for poor Carlo's means were of the smallest. When matters were canvassed between him and Laura, he steadily set his face against all notions of partnership with the old jeweller. Laura feared that her father's pride would rebel against this proposal of complete abdication. But Carlo was of opinion that the lottery had swept all that away, together with so much else.

At all events, it was settled between them, as they walked back from the Cascine on the Ascension-day evening, that the attempt should be made. Carlo went over his calculations yet once again, and, as usual, a certain sum of a hundred dollars figured in the little budget, which Laura was to receive on her marriage from her godfather. These hundred dollars had been laid aside years and years ago by the little cavaliere, long before he had quitted his place in the government office,

and had they been placed at interest, might have been two hundred by this time. But nothing, to Carlo's great disgust, could ever induce Niccolo Sestini to take any step of the kind. There were the identical dollars, all fresh from the mint, and those dollars he should put into Laura's hand when she was to be married. Over and over again had he resisted temptation to permit the little hoard to be diminished. And he was equally immovable in refusing to touch it for the purpose of increasing it. "How could he know," he observed, when it was shown him that the hundred might ere this have become two hundred—"how could he know that Laura would have remained single so long?" So the hundred dollars were but a hundred; but they were sure. And they were counted on by the young couple as a very important fund for meeting the immediate expenses of starting, and thus leaving Carlo's little capital free for the all-important work of stocking the old shop.

It may be surmised that Laura and Carlo saw little of the surpassing beauty of their sunset walk by the bank of the Arno from the Cascine to the city gate, and thence by the long line of the Lungarno to the Ponte Vecchio. It was then arranged between them that Carlo should call on her father on the following morning, and make his proposal. Old Laudadio, who, as in the morning, walked in front with the cavaliere, was equally blind to all

around him, unless it were that he occasionally recorded to himself the numbers suggested, according to his science, by the objects that met his eyes. A little boy patiently dangling a bit of string at the end of a stick in the river, produced the remark that fishing with a hook was 41. Two men, with bare brown legs and arms, in a boat, which they were loading with sand scooped up from the shallows of the river, and which looked as if one more shovelful added to the heap which had already brought their gunwale to the level of the water, must surely sink their boat, led to the observation that sand denoted No. 20.

Old Niccolo alone seemed, as he gently puffed his cigar, strolling onwards with his hands behind his back, to be enjoying the lovely view of his dear Florence to the utmost. For among these Southern organisations, be it observed, it does not follow that because a man is seventy years of age, an ex-clerk in a public office, fat and paunchy, and an old fool into the bargain, he is therefore insensible to beauty of any kind. A Parisian, in a similar position and circumstances, would see no beauty save of a far more factitious kind. It is not so with a Tuscan.

"Ah! come è bella! come è bella!" he exclaimed, as the moon rose over the black pine-forests of Vallombrosa, and tipped the pinnacles

of the Palazzo Vecchio's tall slender tower with her light.

"Moon," said Laudadio, "is number 6."

"She must be full to-night, I think," remarked Sestini.

"But *full* moon is 90, my sympathetic number!" cried old Vanni.

"What a head he has! What a philosopher's head!" said the ex-clerk, shaking his own in admiring wonder.

And so they passed under the shadow of the quaint old buildings on the Ponte Vecchio.

The Ponte Vecchio, or old bridge at Florence, is one of the most remarkable specimens remaining in Europe of the mediæval fashion of turning bridges into streets, by loading them with rows of houses on either side. Space within a walled and fortified inclosure was of course scarce and valuable; and the growing difficulty of lodging an increasing community within the unelastic circuit of its stone girdle, led citizens to this and other non-sanitary expedients, which, according to Dame Nature's usual just and inexorable mode of dealing with us, levied inevitable retribution on mankind for the crime of so mismanaging their lives on this fair earth as to make stone walls round their dwellings necessary to them. In a simply artistic point of view, something may be found to be said on either side—in favour of the old building-laden

bridge, as well as of the modern unembarrassed structure. If Waterloo Bridge be a beautiful and magnificent work of art, ancient London Bridge, as its appearance has been preserved for us by old pictures and engravings, was rich in picturesque beauty of its kind. And on the banks of the Arno, although the Ponte Santa Trinità, situated a few hundred yards lower down the stream, is a masterpiece of elegance, lightness, and scientific construction, it is its ancient neighbour, with its quaint superstructure of queer little shops, that attracts the eyes and occupies the sketch-books of both resident and pilgrim artists.

The Florentine working jewellers, who produce the combinations of pearls, garnets, and turquoises, which are peculiar to Florence, and who invent cunning Etruscan settings for *pietra dura* and cameo ornaments, still stick to the Ponte Vecchio. Their shops are of very diminutive dimensions. Behind most of them a tiny little back-shop is contrived, generally for the purpose of a workshop, by dint of projecting the buildings over the sides of the bridge, and supporting them by timbers, resting in a sloping position on its solid masonry. Notwithstanding what would seem a somewhat insecure foundation, these buildings are of two, and in some cases of three stories. They are built with complete contempt for all uniformity and regularity; and being adorned, here with an

ancient stone-cut coat of arms or an inscription, there with a fragment of fresco or a tabernacle to the Virgin, with its pendent lamp in front of it, the general effect is picturesque in no ordinary degree.

Laudadio Vanni and his three companions turned up the bridge from the Lungarno, and stopped before the narrow door of one of the little houses on the left hand as you cross from the north to the south side of the river. Massive iron-bound shutters, not made to stand perpendicularly against the front of the house, but projecting from it in a slope, so as to cover and protect the cases of jewelry made to jut out from the little window fronts, in order to gain a little space at the cost of stealing it from the public way, were in front of every tenement on the bridge, and now that they were all closed on this high day and holiday, had the appearance of huge sloping-roofed chests deposited on the pavement in front of each little house. Every narrow door, barely large enough for one person to pass through it at a time, was secured by two or more huge locks. The Florentine locksmith still looks mainly to massiveness and size as the elements of security, and dreams not as yet of the cunning devices by which an ounce of steel in the hands of a Bramah or a Chubb is made to render better service than half a dozen pounds' weight of less-skilled workmanship.

The old jeweller deliberately drew from his pocket a sufficiently greasy-looking leathern bag, or key case, which with its contents may have weighed some six or eight pounds. Unwinding the thong which was bound around it, he took out first one huge key, which he applied to a lock at the middle height of the door, and gave it three complete turns. Then another such lock was opened at the top of the door. And lastly, an immense padlock, which secured an iron stanchion across the whole width of it, at the bottom, was removed; and then at length the narrow door thus jealously secured was opened. There was little enough at present in old Laudadio's shop to necessitate all these precautions, but such had not always been the case.

Laura struck a light as soon as all four had entered the miniature dwelling, and proceeded, while her father carefully put up his keys again, to light two of those slender tall brass lamps, with their implements—snuffers, scissors for cutting the wick, and pin for trimming it, hanging around it by three brass chains—and their oil reservoirs and burners, made still in the shape of those found in old Etruscan tombs—lamps which are seen in every Tuscan house, and have in the eyes of strangers such a curiously classical appearance.

Placing one of these on the narrow little work-bench before the window on one side of the door,

which was her father's now rarely occupied place of work, and in front of which stood his old worn arm-chair, she passed with the other through a door still narrower than that which communicated with the street, into the second room, if a space of some six feet square could be called such. Here, in front of a tiny window overhanging the river, was Laura's own little work establishment, with its appurtenances of multitudinous small tools, spirit-lamp, blow-pipe, &c. Three or four casts of bronzes and basso-rilievi were hung round the little cabin. One or two old books, in a sadly dilapidated condition, containing engravings of celebrated gems and cut stones, lay upon a hanging table (or shelf rather, it was so narrow) against one of the side-walls. The little bit of a window, small though it was, gave the inmate the precious advantage of a pure and unbroken light; for, looking out over the river as it did, there was nothing between it and the heavens.

Here, seated at her bench and busily at work in shaping the delicate materials of her art into the expression of some dainty device or skilful reproduction of mediæval workmanship, Laura passed the happiest hours of her life; unless, indeed, those exceptional ones of the society of Carlo are to be counted as ranking first in her estimation.

And now this evening, one of the last, as she hoped, silly mortal! of that short, never-returning

blossom-time of a life which precedes love's fruit-season—this evening she would celebrate by a combination of both delights. The two old men sat down in the front shop for a “chiaccherata”—a bout of gossip; and Carlo, as she had intended him to do, followed her into her workshop and artistic sanctum. She sat down in her accustomed seat at the narrow work-bench before the window, and Carlo took the only other seat in the little room, and placed himself at the end of the bench, and thus at right angles to her and the window. Of course they had enough to talk of. But if Laura had been intent on talk only, the lamp would hardly have been necessary; for the moonlight was streaming in at the little window, and was reflected in a long pathway of light on the water, extending from the edge of the shadow cast by the “Ponte alle Grazie”—the bridge next above the Ponte Vecchio on the river—till it ended beneath the arches of the old bridge under their feet. Few quainter and more characteristic town views could be found than that commanded by the little window at which the lovers sat. In front, the queer old bridge of the Grazie, with its chapels, and little shops on its massive piers all in deep shadow, and the Chianti hills in the distance; to the left the river façade of the Uffizi, with its noble arches and harmonious Palladian architecture—that frontage of which Vasari was prouder

than of all his other various art-works, and of the difficulty of rearing which on the unstable soil of the river-brink he boasts so much—all this, too, black in deep shade; then, to the right, the strangely varied line of the backs of the houses, which at this part of the river come sheer down to the water, without any intervening quay or pathway. These were in the full moonlight; but the irregularities of the buildings chequered the light with innumerable variously-shaped patches of shade. The backs of houses always offer a more suggestive and amusing view, and often a more picturesque one, than their more uniform street fronts, got up with a view to respectable appearance in public. The inhabitants of every one of them would be far more interesting objects of observation than they mostly are, if one could get a peep at their minds and opinions in an analogous behind-the-scenes point of view. And it is the same with their dwellings.

CHAPTER III.

THE JEWELLER'S SHOP.

LAURA's lamp was not needed for looking on this scene, or for conversing with Carlo, as they sat in the moonlight. But she was never absent from her work-bench for a few hours without longing to be back at it. And now she was in a hurry to look at a piece of workmanship which she was completing, and which she was anxious to compare with an engraving she had recollected while at the Cascine. Laura's piece consisted in a most ingenious and tasteful combination and adaptation of several pearls of large size, but of very irregular shape, in such a manner as to make their abnormal forms serve, instead of marring, the purpose of her design. Most daintily fancied was the idea she had imagined, and Laura was pleased with her work, and eager to return to it. Carlo had not yet seen it, as she had intended to have shown it him only when finished. But this evening she could not resist drawing it forth from the little locked drawer beneath the working-bench;

and so it was presented for the criticism of the Paris-taught workman in its still unfinished state.

“Charming!” cried Carlo, genuinely pleased with the beauty of the gem; “davvero, davvero—truly, truly, it is exquisite. There is but my Laura in all Florence this day capable of a design so deliciously fancied. There is the true sentiment of the cinque-cento,” added he, recurring to a Florentine artist’s constant beau-ideal of art in all its branches.

“Ah, that is the real praise!” said Laura; “that is what I have been striving after. And if I could only hope that I had a ray of the real light!”

Very absurd, was not it, for a poor jeweller’s prentice daughter to talk in such a strain? Absurd enough for a girl to meddle with men’s work at all, and quite against all the rules of the trade! But then, you see, poor Laura was an enthusiast in her own way; knew all the glories of the Carrionis, Gaffuris, Torricellis, and Ginghis, the masters of her own craft in the days when fine art meant the creation of the beautiful in any form and in any material; knew especially the story of Francesco Borghigiani and his daughter, who at a later day won herself a niche in Art’s Pantheon by her skill in works of the same class. And what with old Laudadio’s ancient Ponte

Vecchio traditions, her own art readings, her Florentine old-world notions, and her enthusiastic perception and culture of the beautiful, the pretty jewelleress had not the least idea that the professors of her craft had been pushed in the world's onward movement from the place of artists into that of artisans.

"What!" she would have cried, "was not old Niccolo Caparra, the blacksmith, immortalised by Vasari in the same pages that record Perugino and Raphael, on account of his beautiful forgings? For me the artist is he who can feel and reproduce beauty!"

Quite a fanatica, this pretty little Laura! Yes; but not by very far so strange a one, observe, under the shade of Brunelleschi's dome, as she would have been under that of Christopher Wren.

Carlo Bardi had acquired more modern notions, and, moreover, was not an enthusiast in any way, though Laura's enthusiasm appeared infinitely beautiful to him.

"I *do* think, then, in all truth," replied he to Laura's outburst, "that your work has quite the style of the old workman. But I very much fear, my Laura, that the world's tastes have so much changed, that, with the exception of here and there a purchaser with antiquarian tastes, this beautiful work of yours would not be calculated

to meet the modern demand. Look, now, at this model of a brooch," added he, taking a small case from his pocket, "that we have just received from Paris at our place, as a sample of the last new style."

"A sample!" cried Laura, flushing with indignation; "and of the latest Paris style. Do tell me, Carlo mio, whether he who wrought that crucifix," pointing to a plaster model of an exquisite work by Benvenuto Cellini, "used to receive samples of the latest style from Paris?"

"Not so, Laura," replied Carlo, quietly; "unhappily, alas! Paris and Florence have changed places. Benvenuto sent the Parisians samples of the newest style. That is the difference."

"No! Carlo, no! and no again. What is this vulgar thing sent here for? That you and every one on the bridge may make fifty dozen exactly like it, if you could get the order for them. Is not it true? And do you think Cellini's works were sent to Paris with any such hope or expectation? When the French king wanted Florentine art, he had to bring the Florentine artist, I think, and not *samples*, to Paris."

"That is very true, Laura mia," said Carlo, stooping across the bench to press a kiss on the cheek that was so charmingly coloured by her disdainful mood; "but say, darling, why do you

call this French brooch vulgar? Is not it very pretty?"

"It is vulgar," said Laura, nodding her graceful head, "first because it *is* a sample, and may serve for one; because anybody can make another exactly like it, and as good as the original. It is vulgar, secondly, because the value of it is more in the intrinsic cost of the material than in the workmanship; and, thirdly, it is vulgar because no sentiment went to the making of it; the maker put none of his individuality into it, and it is, therefore, as one would say of a human being, all body and no brain, and no heart."

"It is quite true," replied Carlo, "that our modern workman would turn you out as many dozen of such brooches as you choose to order, not one of which could you tell from the original. But still, modern work has its advantages and excellences. See, now, these circular lines! They are perfectly accurate. See how truly in the centre is the exact point that ought to be the centre. You know how constantly the old works, even of the first hands, are inaccurate in such matters. A lopsided circle, an untrue angle, or a false centre, would not be tolerated nowadays."

"So much the worse for those who won't tolerate them!" cried Laura. "I love the careless inaccuracies of the old workers. Their care

was occupied otherwise. These little departures from mechanical accuracy mark the individuality of the artist. An artist is not a machine, to work with machine-like precision. Is one man's mind the exact counterpart of another's? Am I the same one day that I am another? I like the careless inexactitude that marks the humanity of the artist without injuring the expression of his thought, better than the precision which only shows that your compasses were in good order. But as for my poor trinket here, one of the here and there individuals of antiquarian tastes has been met with, for this is a commission for an Englishman. It came to me through Signor Raddi, at the Gallery."

"I am delighted to hear it, my own Laura!" said Carlo; "for the truth is, that I am thinking of the subject rather from the mercantile than from the artistic point of view. And you know, that if all goes well for our hopes to-morrow, as please God it will, it is in that light that we must look at it."

"Heaven grant that all may go well!" responded Laura, fervently; "but oh, Carlo, I fear, I fear. I think I shall sit here and work at my pearls all night. For then I shall think of my work, and get over the hours. But I am sure I shall not sleep a wink. Sometimes it seems to come out quite clear to me, that of

course my father will never consent to take off the old name that has been over the shop for three generations. You don't know how much pride my poor father has in his business."

"I think, my Laura, that when the business was, the pride was; but both, I suspect, have been killed by the same malady," said Carlo, a little bitterly. "Besides," he added, "there is the too evident difficulty of going on, as things are. Surely your father must feel painfully anxious for the future, and will welcome a proposition which will, I trust, remove all anxiety from him for ever."

"You forget, Carlo dear, that my father feels poverty only as one does who is on the point of leaving it behind him for ever. He is well and truly persuaded that the prize, which has so often seemed within his grasp, will come at last, and that soon. And if it should, Carlo——"

"Laura! by all the saints, don't let me hear you talk in that way too! Have you not seen enough of lottery drawing and gambling by this time?" said sensible Carlo, sadly.

"But my dear father *does* understand the lottery as few others do," pleaded Laura. "And I am sure, if calculation and meditation on the cabala and the mathematics can avail, he ought to win."

"Laura! Laura! for Heaven's sake don't talk

so?" groaned poor Carlo, with real alarm. "Tell me," said he, "did you ever buy a ticket, Laura? Did you ever wish to do so?"

"Surely you know, Carlo, I never did either the one or the other. I neither understand anything about it, nor ever attempted to understand it. The numbers for my terno are my own true love, my art, and my old work-bench. Papa would tell the numbers sympathetic to all three in a minute. Will my terno come up, Carlo?" said she, with a look which made it impossible for Carlo to scold.

"Dearest," he said, "I would rather talk of our happiness under any other form. Can it be that you really have any shadow of belief in the possibility of any connection between the numbers to be drawn out of the wheel at the lottery, and all the calculations, sympathetic numbers, and dreams that your father, and so many others, put so much faith in?"

"In truth, dearest Carlo," replied Laura, seriously, but without a particle of the animation and intense interest that had lighted up her face, and lent fire to her eyes, a few moments previously, when she had been speaking of matters of art—"in truth, dearest Carlo, I have never given the question a thought, and know, as I said, that I understand nothing about it. But—"

"Understand it, Laura!" broke in Carlo, the sceptical and the sensible; "why, it is within the comprehension of a baby."

“And yet they all speak of it,” rejoined Laura humbly, “as a profound science and mystery, to be fathomed only by the longest and deepest mathematical study. See, now,” she continued, “what reasons I have to believe these things, which seem to you so incredible. My dear, dear father certainly was never considered wanting in intelligence. You know, before pressing want of money led him to devote all his attention to this subject, how highly his talents were thought of by all the men of art in Florence. And years of deep study have only confirmed him more and more in the certainty of his speculations.”

Carlo groaned; but not letting him interrupt her, she went on:

“Then, as you remarked yourself, my father is far from singular in his belief. How many others think like him? And then again, above all, that book which he had with him this morning. I have never so much as looked into it. But I have often and often heard him quoting the names of the great philosophers whose calculations are there given. I know that the book states the correspondences and sympathies of numbers, and the possibility of winning in the lottery by their means, as matters of fact. And it is credible that the government and Holy Church, which takes such ceaseless care to prevent evil books of any kind from being printed, would suffer that book to be published and sold

openly to thousands of people, deluding them in the most cruel and wicked manner, if it were all false? Is this in any way credible, I say?"

Carlo's Paris-grown ideas brought to his lips some pithy expressions of his estimate of the paternal care of "Government and Holy Church," in reply to his Laura's triumphant arguments. But he suppressed them, wisely judging that so very large a dose of novel and startling doctrine, administered all at once, might be more than was good for the mental digestion of his pretty and much-loved patient. So contenting himself with inwardly resolving that a little enlightenment on these matters should reach his Laura's deeply art-instructed, but on all other subjects blank-paper mind, at some future and more convenient period, he merely said:

"Well, my sweet Laura, without pretending to give up my own ideas on the matter, I will be content if, as you tell me, you, at all events, never felt any inclination to dabble in the lottery."

"And if I had, Carlo, which I truly never had, would it not be enough for me to know that you did not approve of it?"

This, as the speaker doubtless felt, could only be answered by a very tender caress. And then it was settled between them that the all-important interview of the morrow should come off at ten

o'clock, at which hour Carlo was to call on the old man for the purpose.

Of course Laura and Carlo would have sat on where they were as long as ever the two old men in the front shop chose to leave them undisturbed. But it was not long after they had finished their business and type-reproducible talk, and had betaken themselves to very orthodox hand-in-hand moon-gazing, that the roundabout figure of Godpapa Niccolo appeared in the too narrow frame of the little doorway between the two rooms. Laudadio, he said, was especially absorbed in some calculations of the influence which the full of the moon would have on the drawing of the lottery on the following Saturday at Rome, as deducible from the numbers that came up the last time the drawing took place at Rome in the quarter of the full moon. And he had betaken himself to the room above, which was reached by a ladder-like stair constructed in the thickness of the wall. Carlo and he, he said, would go off to bed, and Laura was to close the door behind them.

The engagement between Laura and Carlo was perfectly well known to Sestini, and had his warm approbation. The hundred dollars, he said, were ready at the first intimation that the wedding was fixed. He was not aware, however, of Carlo's determination to bring matters to a crisis by the proposal the reader has heard. As they left the

heavily-ironed little door, which Laura was heard barring and bolting inside, Carlo told the old cavaliere his project, and asked his opinion as to the probability of Signor Vanni's acceptance of it.

"My opinion is," said Niccolo, "that he will gladly accept it. For when a man's head is occupied by the profound and intense studies which engross my respected friend, I have observed that he rarely troubles himself much about meaner things. A wonderful head has old Laudadio Vanni!"

"I have made much the same observation that you have, Signor Cavaliere," returned Carlo, "and it is on it that I build my hopes of success."

"I heartily wish it you, both for dear Laura's sake and your own. Good night, Signor Carlo."

"Good night, Signor Cavaliere!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TERNO.

It was a Friday evening, about a month after the day of the "merenda" in the Cascine and the conversation following it, which has been recorded in the last chapter. And the same four persons were once again together in the little shop on the Ponte Vecchio. Upon this occasion, however, the party of four was not divided into two pairs as had then been the case, but were all assembled in the larger front shop. Carlo's proposition had been duly made to the old jeweller, as had been projected; and the result had fully confirmed the sagacity of his judgment on the subject. As soon as old Laudadio had been made to understand that it was intended to assure to him a home and maintenance, together with unbounded command of his own time, and ample leisure for pursuing studies which had become his master passion, he jumped at the proposal. All the feelings which would once have arrayed themselves in opposition to it—the citizen's pride, the artist's pride, the householder's pride—

had long since died out under the blighting encroachment of the one domineering thought, like the healthful vegetation that perishes beneath the baleful shade of the upas-tree. Carlo had judged rightly. The lottery, which had killed so much else, had killed all these things in the old man.

The proposed arrangements, therefore, had all been brought to bear prosperously. The marriage of Carlo and Laura was fixed for the following Sunday. It was to take place in the quiet little church of Santo Stefano, which serves as a parish church for the houses on the northern part of the bridge. After some delay and trouble the necessary papers and certificates were all in order. Carlo, like most others of his class and generation, had not been near a confessional box for a long time. But it was necessary to do so, and to have a certificate to that effect, before he could be married. And he had, not without considerable repugnance, gone through the ceremony, and obtained his papers accordingly. On the morrow the necessary agreements between him and old Vanni were to be formally executed before a notary; and the neat tablet, with the words, "Carlo Bardi, Jeweller and Goldsmith," in letters of gold on a blue enamelled ground, which had been duly prepared, was to be put up over the narrow little door, in the place now occupied by the half-effaced and faded name of Laudadio Vanni, which had

been written there in old-fashioned black letters on a white ground more than half a century ago. This morrow, in short, was to be a very busy day with Carlo. The goods in which he had invested his little capital for the stocking of his shop had all been purchased, some in Florence, and some in Paris. The latter were still in the custom-house; some of the former not yet delivered. But Carlo hoped to have them all safe under his own roof by the Saturday night, and looked forward to a long day of hurry and bustle. Laura was to be equally busy in receiving the goods, arranging, cataloguing, and examining, all day long.

This Friday evening, therefore, was the last quiet hour before the marriage, and the last of the old jeweller's life as a householder and master tradesman. His life-long friend, Niccolo, had accordingly chosen this evening to bring his congratulations—and the bride's dower.

"Here they are, my friends," said the cavaliere, producing two long rouleaux wrapped in paper, that looked as yellow as an old man's life-long treasured packet of love-letters; "here they are, two fifties, just as I rolled them up something like twenty years ago. They have never been touched since, though many a time there has been sore need of them. But trust old Cola Sestini for that! Sure bind, safe find! And now, Laura mia," he added, as he put the heavy rolls into her

hands, "there they are, and the keeping of them is off *my* mind."

"You know, Caro Signor Cavaliere," said Laura, "that grateful as Carlo and I are for an assistance so important to us, there is little more to be said about it than we ought to say every day. For God knows how things would have gone with us but for you. You must be tired of being thanked, and anybody else would be tired of doing the good deeds to be thanked for. Here, Carlo," she added, as she put the packets into his hands, "you have not to learn now all that my godfather has been to me."

"Thanks, Signor Cavaliere, for my Laura's dower," said Carlo, as he got up to take the money, extending as he did so his right hand to the old man, "and a thousand times more thanks for your approval of our marriage. I will lock up the dollars, and leave them yet a little longer in their old wrappings. But I am afraid that their long repose is very nearly over."

And so saying, Carlo proceeded to place the two rouleaux in an iron-doored strong safe, constructed in the thickness of the wall, just opposite to the staircase, which opened in the doorway between the front and back shop. Carlo turned on them the massive key of the safe, and put it in his pocket, thus exercising the first act of master-ship of the house.

“Godfather, thirty-seven; dower, twenty-five; marriage, twenty-eight,” cried Laudadio, rising from his old arm-chair in great and evident excitement. “The very numbers! The numbers I——” He checked himself, looking round on his three auditors with a sharp glance, half timid and half suspicious; but continued, as he paced to and fro the few steps to which the limits of the little shop confined him, muttering to himself, “Was there ever a clearer indication? It satisfies all the rules. All, all! This at least is clear. At last! at last! And yet——friends,” continued the old man, reaching his hat from the peg on which it hung, “I must go out for a short time. I shall not be long. I will be with you in half an hour. Cavaliere, I shall find you here when I come back?”

Old Sestini and the young couple glanced at each other as the old man left the shop, and the former was the first to speak.

“They did come pat enough, the three numbers, it must be owned; didn’t they, now! and all on the same subject, too, as one may say: godfather, dower, and marriage! Well, that *is* remarkable! Who knows, who knows!”

Carlo shrugged his shoulders, with an expression which consideration for Laura barely sufficed to keep half way between contempt and pity.

“Has he any money in his pocket, Laura?”

asked he; for the errand on which old Laudadio was gone was evident enough to them all.

"Not more than a paul or two, dear Carlo, I know for certain," replied Laura; "and to-night, you know, for the last time, you won't object——"

"Nay, Laura mia, I say nothing," rejoined Carlo, rather sadly; "but as for the *last time*, I hope your father has some years of life before him yet; for a lottery player there is no *last time* till his own last hour."

"It would be hard on Vanni if he had not a ticket for to-morrow," remarked the cavaliere. "The drawing takes place in Florence, and it must be much pleasanter to see the numbers come up, one by one, than merely to read them all in a lump, two or three days afterwards. Besides, who knows? as my old friend so justly observed. I have great confidence myself in Laudadio Vanni's science. Such a head as he has!"

"But you don't avail yourself of the suggestions indicated by his science, Signor Cavaliere," said Carlo, with a dash of satire in his tone, which was quite imperceptible to the worthy ex-clerk.

"I? No, I don't. Why should I? Don't you see, Signor Carlo, I have got my crust, my cup of coffee, and my cigar, sure and safe, every day as sure as the sun rises. I *might* lose them if I were to play ever so wisely. And I could not make Sunday begin over again, when Sunday

night is come, if I won the biggest terno ever played for," said the old cavaliere, with more philosophy than he guessed.

Meantime, Laudadio Vanni did not go at once, as his friends supposed he would, to the nearest lottery office, and there empty his pockets of their little all in exchange for a scrap of paper. He was in too high a state of nervous excitement for this. Those three numbers, which he had so promptly matched with the things to which they are appended in the cabalistic volume described in a former chapter, had, as he, correctly or not, persuaded himself, occurred to him in his dreams. It was, indeed, likely enough that they might have done so. The three ideas with which his "science" connected them had of course naturally enough been in his thoughts lately. And as his morbid mind incessantly and habitually fixed itself upon the numbers suggested by every incident, every object, and every idea which presented itself to him, and as these numbers were the continual subject of all his waking meditations, it is likely enough that he might have dreamed of them. At all events, to the old jeweller's diseased mind, the reiterated suggestion of these figures appeared to be proof, "plain as heavenly writ," that these were the fortunate numbers which, duly backed, would lead him on to fortune.

To minds in any degree accustomed to observe

or examine the connection of cause and effect, it seems altogether impossible that any human being, not perfectly insane, should imagine that information of the numbers about to be drawn at hazard out of a wheel should thus be communicated to him. And, in truth, the existence of such a persuasion would be utterly incredible, did we not see it existing, and actively influencing, large numbers of persons, in other respects as sane as the average of mankind. A moment's consideration of the phenomenon sets one speculating as to the possible theories of these lottery devotees respecting the world they live in, the government, and the eternal and almighty governor of it; thoughts too large and serious, maybe, for this light page! Yet they are such as necessarily and properly rise from the subject of it; and without them we should fail to appreciate duly the thick and heavy darkness of the spiritual night—a darkness surely equal to that of the “untutored mind” of any fetish-worshipping Indian—which envelops the pupils of a “paternal” government and a dominant orthodox church.

It is difficult to imagine the nature of the workings of a mind under the hallucination which possessed poor old Laudadio Vanni. But, assuredly, doubt had no place among them. Success, the long-delayed reward of his studies, patience, and perseverance for long years, was now within his grasp! But how was he to avail himself of the

great opportunity? Fortune slighted would assuredly never offer her favours a second time! Cruel, cruel fate! to place the prize within his reach just when he was unable—all but unable—to profit by the golden chance!

Tormented with these thoughts, the old man turned from the bridge, down the Via degli Archibusieri towards the Uffizi, and began pacing to and fro beneath the colonnade that faces the river. Pulling from his pocket the old leathern bag that served him for a purse, he emptied the contents into his lean and shaking hand, and counted up the amount of the various small coins. There was one paul, one half paul, a piece of two crazie, or quarter of a paul, and several of the small thin copper coins called soldi, the twentieth part of the lira, and containing twelve denari. The lira is worth eightpence; and its two hundred and fortieth part, the denaro, no longer exists in the body, but only as a money of account. These Lire, Soldi, and Denari are the originals of our £ s. d., but while prosperity and progress have with us pushed up the value of the coins to pounds and shillings, they have remained in Italy, during her period of stagnation, more nearly of their original worth. So that, although Laudadio counted up one pound ten shillings and eightpence, his whole available assets amounted only to an unstatable fraction more than a shilling.

Now this sum, invested in a ticket for a terno, would, in case of success, produce a prize of some twelve hundred crowns, or about two hundred and fifty pounds; a very large sum to Laudadio Vanni, but far from sufficient to repay him with interest all the moneys he had, in the course of his long life, sunk in lottery tickets. And he considered that Fortune owed him nothing less than this, and that she was now at last ready and willing to discharge all her debt to him, if he could only comply with the indispensable conditions. To make no more than twelve hundred dollars out of the great and sure opportunity now offered to him, seemed a stroke of misfortune and ill-luck more difficult to bear than all the disappointments his worship of the blind goddess had hitherto exposed him to. Visions of riches paraded themselves before his mind, riches which should not only bring with them all the advantages which usually accompany them, but which should triumphantly justify in the face of all Florence, and especially of his own friends and family, his wisdom and prudence, and the accuracy and value of his much-boasted science. The more he thought of all this, and the more he pictured to himself the certainty of success, the more the small sum at his disposition seemed altogether contemptible and insignificant.

“If only they would believe me!” he muttered, as he continued in increasing agitation and excite-

ment to walk up and down beneath the dark colonnade, turning over and over in his hands the poor little coins, for which he felt a growing contempt. "If only they in their ignorance would trust the knowledge gained by half a century of study and calculation! But they are obstinate as ignorance always is. And for whose sake do I need wealth now? Not for my own, I trow. And I could make their fortune for them! All too late for me! But I could make for them a life and position such as my Laura deserves, and such as Carlo Bardi has never dreamed of! And all that is wanting is a few dollars, which they have, and of which they can have no need, till after they will have been returned to them tenfold—a hundred-fold!—a thousand-fold!"

The old man had quickened his pace as these thoughts were passing through his mind; and he continued his walk, even quicker and quicker for some minutes, gesticulating with his arms, and ever and anon coming to a sudden stop in his walk. At last he turned towards the bridge, and slackening his pace considerably, and bending his face more than usual to the ground, he reached the door of his own shop. He paused before putting his hand to the door; looked with a sharp suspicious glance up and down the bridge; pulled a check blue handkerchief from his pocket, with which he wiped the drops from his brow; tossed with an

impatient movement the coins he had been counting into his coat pocket, and then entered the little shop.

It was by that time about half-past nine o'clock, and the cavaliere and Carlo were thinking of saying good night. They all took it quite as a matter of course that the old man had been to the office, and had expended all the money in his pocket in a lottery ticket.

"You'll be watching the drawing to-morrow, my friend," said Sestini. "Shall I come with you? If you will, we can meet at the café in the piazza."

"No! I don't know—perhaps I shall not go to-morrow," returned the old man, hesitatingly; but added, after a pause, "well! yes! we will go together. I will look for you at the café a little before mid-day."

Laura and Carlo had meanwhile said their good nights, and once again he and the cavaliere left the shop together.

"Let us go to bed, Laura," said the old man, as soon as ever they were gone. "You will have a long day's work to-morrow, and I am sleepy."

Laura was rather surprised to hear him say so, for his usual habit was to sit up long after she had gone to her closet over the back shop. But she made no remark, her mind being, as may be supposed, full enough of her own thoughts.

"Good night, father," she said; "sleep well,

and dream of the numbers of your terno for to-morrow;" and so saying, she climbed the steep stair to her miniature bedroom, leaving him to follow her up the ladder-like stair.

Laudadio went to the door of the shop, opened it, and looked out anxiously, as it seemed, first in one direction, then in the other, and then closing it, put his hand to the heavy bolts and locks, which he moved, as if securing the shop for the night. Yet he turned no lock, and shot no bolt, but leaving the door thus simply closed, proceeded to climb the stairs, and entered his room over the front shop. There, instead of beginning to undress, he seated himself on the bedside, and remained perfectly still for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. Opposite to the bed was a sort of cupboard contrived in the thickness of the wall, by the side of the one small window that lighted the room. To this he then went, and from behind some articles of clothing on the uppermost shelf drew forth a large key. Having possessed himself of this, he again sat down on the bed for several minutes. He then arose, and creeping noiselessly to the stair-head, again paused there some minutes. It might have been thought impossible for the old man to have descended the steep narrow stair with the perfect noiselessness with which he contrived to do it. Once at the bottom, he rapidly, but with caution to avoid the

slightest sound, poured from his lamp a drop or two of oil on the wards of the key in his hand, and then applied it to the door of the safe in which Carlo had locked the cavaliere's hundred dollars. The key was, in fact, a duplicate one, laid aside when the other had years ago been intrusted to Laura for the nightly custody of the more precious articles in the shop, and long since forgotten, till the recollection of it had unfortunately occurred to the old jeweller, during his pacing under the Uffizi colonnade.

In less than a minute the two rolls of dollars were in his hands, and leaving the lamp burning on the work-bench, he stealthily stepped through the doorway on to the bridge, and quietly closed the door behind him.

Laudadio Vanni had been, though a gambler during the latter part of his life, yet an upright, honourable, and strictly honest man throughout all the many years of it, and it was in vain that he strove to conceal from himself the nature of the action he was now committing. The big drops stood on his wrinkled brow, and dropped from the ends of the straggling silver locks that fell on either side of his hollow emaciated cheeks. He trembled visibly; and instead of hastening at once on his errand, he paused at the top of the bridge under the colonnade, which at that part of it leaves the river visible. It was by this time nearly half-

past eleven. The lottery offices on the night previous to the drawing remain open till twelve. After the first stroke of the clocks sounding midnight, no stake could be played for the morrow's drawing. Yet still he paused. It seemed as if he were half minded to give his honour and fair name the advantage in their struggle with the demon which possessed him, of the chance that he might be too late to accomplish his purpose.

There is under the arches, in the space void of houses, at the top of the bridge, an ancient and dingy picture of a Madonna, in a wooden tabernacle against the wall, and a little dimly twinkling oil-lamp was burning before it. He examined the two rolls of money in the faint ray of light thrown by this lamp, to ascertain that there was no writing on the paper in which they were wrapped; and then turned towards the parapet, and leaning on it again paused, while the minutes ran on quickly towards the moment at which the power of the tempter would be at an end. It wanted now but ten minutes of the time. But there is no part of the city in which that is not more than ample time enough for reaching a lottery receiving-house. The paternal government takes care that the demon of play shall be ever at every man's elbow.

"What would they think of me," he cried, suddenly—"what would they think of me, if they knew all that I know, and knew, also, that I

hesitated to obtain the prize for them? The money won with their money will be all theirs, of course. When I give it them, I shall say, 'Now will you believe that your old father's days and nights of study are worth something?'"

And as he muttered thus to himself, he hurried to the well-known counter, and thrusting himself among the crowd of wretches who were staking the halfpence they had succeeded in procuring just in time, he startled the clerks by putting down his two rouleaux for a terno on the numbers 37, 25, and 28.

The officials in these hells are not unaccustomed to strange sights. Remark on them in no wise enters into their functions. So the money was swept up; and the vile-looking little strip of coarse grey-blue paper was duly scrawled over, signed, sanded, and put into his shaking hand.

As he quitted the den, the great bell of the Palazzo Vecchio began to toll twelve. The yawning clerks shut up their books, and "the game was made" for that week.

After having carefully secured the precious document in an inner pocket, Laudadio's first movement was to return to his home, and he began to walk in that direction. But his steps became slower and slower, and by the time he had reached the foot of the bridge, he felt that he could not endure to pass the remaining hours

of the night in the stillness of his little room over the shop. He felt a strange reluctance, too, to enter his house again, and pass by that safe in the wall at the bottom of the stairs. No! he would go home no more, till he should go in with his triumph and his justification in his hand. So he turned back once more towards the Uffizi colonnade, and again paced forwards and backwards under the now silent and deserted porticos.

But strangely enough, the result of the desperate stake he had played for, which had seemed to him so safe and certain an hour ago, while the "to be or not to be" was still in his own hands, began, now the fatal step was taken, and the irrevocable die cast, to appear less inaccessible to doubts as to the issue. It was one of those revulsions of feeling which the most compendious scheme of ethical philosophy loves to ascribe to the immediate action of the traitorous fiend; but which the students of mental phenomena would attribute to the sense of powerlessness which takes possession of us on the completion of an irrevocable deed, aided, in poor Laudadio's case, by the importunate reproaches of his conscience. It was in vain that he repeated again and again to himself that he was only doing far better for his child with her money than she could do for herself; in vain that he argued that as her father he had some right to act for her, and watch over her interests. The genuine utterances

of the still small voice are less easily overborne and put down than the dictates of the intellectual powers. The old man might succeed in persuading himself that the numbers to be drawn from the lottery wheel on the morrow were revealed to him by his waking and sleeping dreams; but he could not for an instant bring his conscience to absolve him for the deed he had done. The great prize for which he had been hoping for so many years, was now, as he told himself again and again, as good as won; a greater prize, indeed, than he had ever hoped for, for he had never before had the power of risking so large a sum at one time. Yet probably never in his life had Laudadio Vanni passed a more miserable hour than that which he spent in his midnight pacing under the colonnade of the Uffizi.

At length, wearied in body as well as in mind, he betook himself to the great "loggia" of the piazza. Every one who remembers Florence, remembers this magnificent structure by Orcagna, its wonderful noble arches, and the assemblage of masterpieces in marble and bronze collected beneath its lofty roof. At the back of the building a broad stone bench runs along the wall, and on that Laudadio stretched the long length of his gaunt and weary limbs to await the coming of the dawn. Many a worse sleeping chamber might be lighted on by a weary man than that masterpiece of architecture,

proportion, and beauty, all open as its vast arches are to the mild breeze of the Italian summer night. But no bed of down could have brought sleep that night to the old lottery gambler. The stake to be decided by the events of the morrow was too tremendous a one to him. For it will be readily understood that now—strangely inconsistent creatures as we are—the amount of money to be won was the least important part of the interest that for Laudadio hung on the dirty scrap of paper in his pocket.

At last, towards morning he fell into an uneasy doze, from which he was awakened soon after dawn by the workmen coming to erect the scaffolding for the ceremony of the drawing. The grand “loggia” of Orcagna, in the principal square of the city, is the spot chosen for this purpose, and the carpenters and upholsterers were come to make their preparations. Many a condemned man has been waked from his last earthly sleep by the noise of the erection of a scaffolding for a more terrible, though scarcely less pernicious purpose, and has met the coming day with more apathy than Laudadio felt at these preparations for his triumph or intolerable overthrow! How to get through the next six or seven hours? That was now the most immediate question. Remain quiet, he could not. Besides, he was too well known in Florence; and it would have been too strange, perfectly well as his devotion

to the lottery was known to all the world, for him to have been found there at that hour of the morning. So he slunk away from the piazza, and passing through the obscure streets which lie at the back of the Palazzo Pubblico, reached the large square in front of the church of Santa Croce. The vast building was already open, and at a far altar in the transept a few old men and women were hearing, or rather looking at, a morning mass. Here a seat, silence, and solitude were to be had; and Laudadio entered the church and seated himself in a dark corner of the transept, opposite to that in which mass was being said. Here the deep silence of the place, and the fatigue of his sleepless night, gave him the advantage of a couple of hours of forgetfulness. It was nearly eight when he awoke; and he thought he might then venture to go and look at the preparations in the square. He found all there in readiness. There was the gaily-decked raised platform, like a box at a theatre, with its seat for the magistrates, the lofty board prepared for the exhibition of the winning numbers, and the music-desks for the band; and above all, there was the wheel in the front of the box, looking like a large barrel-churn, only made of mahogany, and ornamented with brass mountings. In Naples, there would have been also a place for the priest, who, in that country, always attends on these occasions "to keep the devil from

interfering with the numbers." But in less religious Tuscany this precaution is omitted. All was ready; but the hours, as it seemed to Laudadio, *would* not move on. He returned once again to Santa Croce, and finding it impossible to sit still, occupied himself with strolling about the immense church, and endeavouring to meet with the important numbers, that were so deeply engraved on his brain, in the many inscriptions on the walls and pavement of the building.

In the meantime, Laura had risen early to begin the various work of her busy day. The lamp which her father had left burning had burned itself out. But the unlocked and unbolted door, and the absence of the old man's hat from its accustomed peg, showed that he had gone out. There was nothing to surprise her much in this. She knew that he was apt to be restless on the morning when the lottery was about to be drawn in Florence, on which occasions he was always sure to play. She doubted not, that when he had left them on the preceding evening, he had gone to buy a ticket with the few pauls he had in his pocket, and supposed that he had gone for a morning stroll to walk off his restlessness. Carlo was to be most part of the day at the custom-house, receiving and passing the goods from Paris, and she did not expect to see him till the evening.

So she quietly set to work to arrange, inventory,

and ticket a parcel of jewellery that had come in the day before.

Laudadio had firmly determined that he would not leave Santa Croce till the clock should strike the quarter to twelve. Never did hours appear so interminable to him. Yet as they wore away, and the moment, big with fate, approached, he trembled at the nearness of the minute that was to decide his fate. He had found in the adjoining cloister the gravestone of some one who had died at the age of *thirty-seven*, on the *twenty-fifth* of the month, in the year eighteen '*twenty-eight*. The combination thus met with appeared to him a wonderful confirmation of the justice of his expectations. He was much comforted and strengthened by it; and had several times wandered back into the cloister to gaze on the auspicious numbers. He was standing thus dreamily staring at them, when the long-expected quarter to twelve was tolled from the convent belfry. He started, and all the blood in his body seemed to rush back to his heart. It appeared to him that he would fain have yet had one of those hours which had passed so laggingly interposed between him and the moment which now, at the last, he could not prevent himself from regarding with as much of sickening dread as of hope.

He left the church, however, at once, and walked with a quicker step than usual to the café in the

piazza, at which he had agreed to meet his faithful friend and admirer, Sestini. The placid little cavalieri was at his tryst, calmly sipping a glass of water into which he had poured the remaining third of his little cup of black coffee, after regaling himself with the other two-thirds neat and hot; a favourite mode with the Italians of spreading the enjoyment derivable from three-halfpenny-worth of coffee over as large space of time as possible. Sestini, little observant as he was, could not help noticing the excited manner, the haggard look, and the feverishly gleaming eye of his friend. It still wanted a few minutes of the hour, and Sestini tried to persuade the old man to take some refreshment before going out into the crowd with which the great square was by this time full. But he could not induce him even to sit down. So the two strongly contrasted old men went out to make their way through the crowd to the immediate front of the hustings prepared for the drawing. The figure and face of the old gambler, stooping with hoary age, yet expressing in every shaking movement and every restless glance an excess of highly-strung nervous excitement, might well have caused remark at any other time or place. But amid the crowd in front of the lottery wheel every one was too much occupied with self, and strangely-moved faces were too common to attract attention.

The band had already begun to play a noisy

lively air; the three magistrates in their gowns and high round flat-topped cloth caps were in their places; and two little boys in gay fancy dresses were standing one on each side of that terrible wheel—the instrument of torment little less in amount and in intensity than that caused by the other instrument of the same name the express object of which was torture. And now began the tedious process of unfolding the little rolled-up scrolls containing the numbers, holding them up to the public view, calling them aloud, handing them from one to the other of the presiding functionaries, and finally dropping them one by one into the wheel. And once again Laudadio thought that the minutes went slowly, and that the preliminary formalities would never be completed.

But at length the whole tale from One to Ninety had been deposited in the wheel. The music sounds; the little boys churn away at the fateful churn; two or three turns have tumbled the numbers into a confusion sufficient to make—to all human ken—CHANCE the sole blind master of the position of them; and then, amid sudden and profound silence, the first number is drawn. The boy plunges his bared arm into the machine, brings out one rolled-up scroll between his finger and thumb, holds it aloft, and passes it, always keeping his hand at arm's length, to one of the presiding trio. He unrols it, proclaims aloud "EIGHTY-EIGHT,"

hands it to his colleague, who holds it up aloft open to the people, and passes it to the third officer, who affixes it to the conspicuous board provided for the purpose. Then out blare the trumpets again, and out bursts a tempest of tongues. Nothing is lost yet. Five numbers are to be drawn; and there is yet room for a terno to come up—and to spare. Those, indeed, who have betted that some other number would come up *first* (which is termed playing an “*estratto determinato*”)—those, indeed, have already lost; but for all others “the game is still alive.”

Again the music ceases, and again every voice is suddenly hushed. The same mode of operation is repeated, and this time “*TWENTY-FIVE*” is called aloud, and takes its place on the board by the side of its predecessor.

Again the music and the roar of voices burst forth.

“It’s right!” said Laudadio to his sympathising friend, in a faint and choking voice. “Oh yes! it’s all right. I have no doubt; none.” And Sestini could feel the old man’s arm shaking as if he had been struck by sudden paralysis.

Once again the ceremony is repeated, and “*37*” is the result.

I knew it! I knew it!” cried the old man, trembling all over, while the big drops of perspiration started to his brow. “Oh! there could

be no doubt. Of course I was certain of it." And drawing from his pocket with difficulty, so violently were his hands shaking, the ticket with his numbers, he showed them to his friend, carefully hiding with his lean old hand the sum for which the ticket was made out.

"Ah, my dear friend," said the little cavaliere, "if you had only played for an ambo, you would have been all right." (The ambo is when *two* numbers are named to come up). "An ambo makes a nice little bit of money. I wish it were an ambo."

"Why an ambo?" returned Laudadio, fiercely. "I tell you my terno is certain—certain!"

By this time all hope is over for the majority of the crowd, and the silence for the drawing of the fourth number is by no means so general. Now for it. "56."

A long deep breath came from the old gambler's chest with a sound almost of a groan, and he closed his eyes for a minute. "But it will be all right, I tell you," he said, angrily, as if his companion had maintained the reverse. "I tell you it is sure. It can't fail me now. It can't!"

And now for the last number—the cast of fortune that was to make all safe or all lost. It was a tremendous moment for the old man. The music and the voices sounded strangely in his

ears, as if they were far off. Now, silence! Now!

"*Twenty-NINE!*" shouted the officer.

For one short moment, as the syllables "twenty" reached his ears, the unhappy old man had imagined that all was well with him. Then came with a roar, as it seemed to him, of a mighty tempest wind rushing through his ears, and crushing him to the earth, the fatal sound that hurled him from the summit of his hopes into an abyss of misery.

"What a pity it was not an ambo," said Sestini, not dreaming that the disappointment was a greater or more important one than the veteran gambler had a thousand times had to bear. But the revulsion was too terrible for old Laudadio's over-excited nervous system. After gazing for a moment with a fixed glassy stare into his companion's face, his long attenuated body swayed to and fro like a tall tree whose foot the axe has nearly severed, his gripe on the cavaliere's arm relaxed, and he fell in a dead swoon on the flagstones of the piazza.

Poor little Sestini was extremely shocked and frightened. The crowd of course formed a ring round the prostrate figure of the old man, whose hat had fallen off, and whose long white locks were straggling over his livid face. For a moment they thought that he was dead. But the heaving

of his chest soon indicated that he had but fainted. Many of those around knew old Laudadio Vanni, the jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio, and understood perfectly well the cause of his present trouble. "Poor fellow! he will have been playing high!" said one. "He's one that the Madonna owes a good terno to before he dies!" remarked another. And Sestini, with the aid of three or four of the nearest bystanders, proceeded to carry him to his house on the neighbouring bridge. He probably had regained his consciousness before he reached his home. But his eyes remained closed, and he suffered himself to be carried by those who had picked him up. The fatal ticket remained clutched in his hand, and having been taken from it by Sestini, after those who carried him had placed him in his chair and departed, sufficed to tell very shortly the whole facts of the case.

And the remainder of our story may be told almost as compendiously.

Carlo took the matter very much more coolly than Laura had dared to hope. He said that such things were necessarily to be expected from lottery playing, and—that a new lock, to which he would see himself, must be put on the strong safe.

Sestini remarked that there were few heads in Italy, save that of his friend, who could have discovered *within one* the very numbers to be drawn

for a terno. And Laudadio observed that loss in the lottery was number 90.

The marriage took place duly on the Sunday, despite the loss of Godpapa Sestini's dower. And the business-like Carlo and his artist wife have long since ceased to feel the need of such a sum.

Old Laudadio lived several years after the loss of his last great stake. Did that miscarriage serve to open his eyes or cure him of his malady? Any one who is doubtful on such a point has happily little knowledge of the insanity in question.

The present writer has had an interview with Laudadio Vanni. It took place one bright and frosty moonlight night on the "Ponte Trinità." It was late, and there was no other person on the bridge. The striking but shabby-looking old man, courteously lifting his hat, addressed himself to the deponent, and stating that he had something of importance to communicate, proceeded to propose a partnership enterprise in the lottery; the conditions to be, that the deponent should furnish the funds for the purchase of a ticket, while he, Laudadio, would supply numbers dreamed of by him, and warranted to win.

The deponent, deeming the old man no better than a self-conscious and designing swindler, punished him by saying that he approved perfectly of the scheme, only that he would prefer to reverse the parts. But had he known the history, which he

learned on mentioning his rencontre to some Florentine friends, and which has been set forth in the preceding chapters, he might probably have treated the old lottery dreamer more gently.

ZUAN THE GONDOLIER.*

ON a black and stormy night of October an old man lay dying in his own house, in a little court in the city of Venice. It was a peculiar court—not one of the little “campi” or “campielli” which are so common in the Sea City, and which answer to what in other Italian cities are called “piazze” or “piazzette”—the squares and courts of our own towns. It had been the cloister of a long-since suppressed monastery, the ownership of the buildings of which had passed into private hands. The church, an interesting Gothic brick building of the thirteenth century, is, was then, and for many years had been, used as a warehouse, and the adjoining cloister had been let off or sold off into a number of humble private dwellings. In one of these—one of the best of them—old Jacopo Parravich had long lived, and was now dying.

* Zuan is Venetian for Juan, or Giovanni.

A very picturesque spot is the old cloister—dear to artists—though so hidden away in the labyrinth of Venetian “calle,” or lanes, as to be unknown, and nearly unfindable by the passing tourist. And yet it is so near to the “Salute,” the superb domed church at the head of the Grand Canal, which all the world knows, that the huge towering dome of the more recent church, Longhena’s masterpiece, can be seen from the little cloister raising its head insolently far above the old degraded church of the monastery, which had belonged to a much better period of architecture. Doubtless the cloister, in a picturesque point of view, is far prettier now than it was when inhabited by its original possessors. The beautiful marble columns, with their exquisitely carved capitals, remain, though yellow with dirt and smoke and festooned with cobwebs. One or two only of the charming Venetian Gothic windows of the rooms above the cloister walk remain; but the habits of the dwellers in them have filled the windows with masses of varied colour—flowers or curtains, or articles hung out to dry—which, harmonised and poetised by the light of a Venetian sky, add just the amount of living tints to the sombre old architecture that an artist requires for his purpose.

But on the October evening in question they were harmonised by no such light, and the appearance of the little cloister and the dwellings around

it were sombre and dreary-looking enough. The place itself, from the form and nature of its construction, was much sheltered from the tempest; but the fierce beating of the water in the Grand Canal close at hand against the foundations of the palaces which inclose it, and against the huge marble steps of the Salute, could be heard amid the roaring of the wind, as it rushed from the lagoon up the channel of the Grand Canal with a force that made even the passing of a gondola from one side of it to the other almost, if not quite, impossible. For little as the fine-weather tourist, luxuriously reclining in his gondola on the placid lagoon, may imagine it, there are times when even the small canals can be navigated by gondolas only with extreme difficulty, and not a gondolier in Venice would think of venturing into the wider and more exposed Grand Canal. For the Adriatic is still the "*iracunda Adria*" of the ancient poet, and Venice, queen of it though she be, is now and then not a little afraid of her turbulent subject.

And it was on such a night that the long life of the old Jacopo Parravich had found its last sundown—an ending not inappropriate to his past life, as some of the older gossips of the cloister whispered to one another. Only two or three of the older inhabitants, whose lives were also near their close—for old father Parravich had for a long time past—ever since he had lived in the cloister, indeed

—been a most respectable man—the most highly respectable man in the little community, indeed. And as to the doings of his younger days, he had doubtless repented of them, or had, in truth, forgotten them—which, of course, came to much about the same thing. But other folks do not forget all that they ought to forget so readily as we might wish them to do. And the *chronique scandaleuse* of the locality had preserved stories of the long-ago times when Jacopo Parravich had been one of the most desperate and boldest smugglers of the coast. He was, as his name indicates, a Dalmatian by origin, like so many others of the inhabitants of the Sea-born City, and like so many of his original countrymen, had been a first-rate sailor.

Well, a smuggler! What's that? Public opinion, especially under such a government as that which then ruled Venice, easily forgives sins against the fisc. But then a bold smuggler may have, in the prosecution of his business, to do deeds that In short, there *were* old stories. But Signor Parravich, well to do, and with his nest well feathered, had long been, as has been said, a most respectable man and citizen.

He was such a respectable man, that, as sometimes happens, the weight of his respectability had fallen rather heavily on the members of his family. These consisted, at the time of which we are speaking, namely, the night on which the old man

died, of one son and one daughter, the children of his old age ; for the old man had passed his seventy-fifth year, but his son Jacopo was only twenty-six, and his daughter Zerlina only nineteen. Old Jacopo Parravich had married late in life—in the days of his respectability—and he had been a widower for the last fifteen years.

Now the way in which the burthen of their father's respectability had fallen heavily on his son and daughter had been that in which similar misfortunes so often manifest themselves—the chapter of love and marriage. Old Parravich, to whom wealth and respectability and a son and heir had come all pretty well together, was very desirous that his son should, in the matter of taking a wife, take at the same time a step in the social ladder. There had not been wanting to the young man an opportunity of doing so, had he chosen to profit by it. Had he so chosen at a time now about five years ago, he might have married a rich wife and settled down at home, with nothing else to do in life than to go to the café every day, to the theatre every Sunday, and *flaner* on the Great Square of St. Mark all day long. But the bright laughing eyes and lithe undulating figure of Ninetta Ponti, the fisherman's daughter at St. Peter's, out beyond the Arsenal, had come between him and this promotion, and rendered it impossible for him. The result had been a very terrible quarrel between him

and the masterful old man, his father; and young Jacopo, shaking the dust off his feet, and swearing that he would rather earn wherewithal to keep a wife of his own choosing, than take one chosen for him, even with all the above enumerated advantages, had gone back to his profession—the sea—and was at the present time absent on a voyage as second mate on board a Levantine trader. He had gone, and had taken with him his father's formally-pronounced curse, more especially fulminated and declared to be eternal and irrevocable if he should ever marry the daughter of Zacaria Ponti, the fisherman at St. Pietro.

And a father's curse, so pronounced and motivated, though it had not availed to keep the young man at home and bend him to obedience, was yet a very heavy and terrible thing to the young Venetian. A Florentine would have laughed to scorn any such bugaboo attempt to interfere with his free will. But it is not in Venice as it is in Florence. Feelings of religion are not dead there among the people as they are at Florence. Old respects, old beliefs, old superstitions are still powerful, not only among the women, but among the men of the ancient Sea City, to a greater degree perhaps than they are in any other part of the peninsula. So young Jacopo Parravich, though unyielding, had gone away very heavily burthened by his father's curse, and made still further miserable by the conviction that, even

if he should decide to disregard such an obstacle, his timid and gentle little Ninetta would never be brought to consent to a marriage so barred.

As for poor Zerlina, she of course could not meet her father's commands with similar rebellion, though they had been laid on her in a manner equally grievous to her. For two reasons she could not. In the first place it was, of course, impracticable for her to walk out of her father's house and carve her own way in the world. And in the second place, maidenly modesty, and perhaps it may be said, a touch of maidenly coquetry, made such a line of action impossible to her; for it was the same fertile topic of difference between seniors and juniors which had occasioned stern words of prohibition, none the less galling because Zerlina declared that they were needless, from her father to her.

In truth, it could not but be admitted that the suit of Zuan Contarin for the hand of Jacopo Parravich's daughter was a very bold one; for Zuan, despite his patrician name, was but a gondolier. He was, however, about the best representative of his class in all Venice—the most able, the most steady, and the most prosperous. His tall and slender, yet vigorous and wiry Venetian figure was a picture, as he stood in his white jacket and trousers and scarlet sash on the high poop of his gondola, skilfully piloting it among a crowd of craft

of all sorts. His gondola, handsome and thoroughly well appointed in all respects, was his own. It had been a hard struggle to save up the nine hundred or a thousand francs needed for the acquisition of the gondola. But that point once gained, matters soon began to go better with Zuan, and he had already commenced the crescendo process of saving money. In the preceding summer he had been the winner in a Murano regatta, having easily distanced all his competitors in the course from the Lido to the mouth of the Murano canal. And that stroke of good fortune had added some hundred francs to his store at one blow.

For all that it was certainly somewhat audacious of Zuan to lift his eyes to the Signorina Zerlina Parravich; and the retired smuggler was scandalised and indignant at the audacity. Zerlina, in her heart of hearts, was neither scandalised nor indignant. Indeed she did not even pretend to be so. But . . . Zerlina was a spoiled child, and a beauty; and in the somewhat capricious exercise of her sovereign rights as such she inflicted many a heart-ache upon poor Zuan. “*Si la jeunesse savait!*” If Zuan had had the experience of forty instead of only twenty years, he might have known that Zerlina loved him. If he had been less modest and less strongly impressed by a sense of his own unworthiness of such a prize, he might have guessed the truth. But, as it was, the capricious

and wayward beauty had chosen to try her lover's constancy by exercising him with alternate hopes and fears, till Zuan had on a hundred occasions half made up his mind to seek a service on board a long-sea merchantman, and bid adieu to love and Venice for ever!

This was the state of things when Parravich, who had never known a day's illness in his life, was stricken down, and felt sure that his time was come.

It was about an hour after sundown, and the dying old man and his confessor were alone together in his chamber looking into the little cloister. Zerlina was sitting, tearful and frightened, on the top stair of the flight which led down into the cloister walk, a few feet from the door of her father's room, and the woman who had been sent in by the doctor to nurse him had seized the opportunity of slipping down into the cloister to talk over the state of things with a knot of the women below, and was enjoying the pre-eminence in gossiping to which position and opportunities entitled her.

Of course the first thing to be done, when the old Venetian felt that his hour was come, was to send for his confessor. It was not that his conscience was very heavily burthened by the recollection of certain lawless and violent deeds of his younger days. These matters were so long ago;

they lay so far behind him. And they had all been in the way of business. But there was a matter which lay very heavy on his heart, the curse which he had pronounced on his only son, and the sad and unforgiving manner in which they had parted—now, or it would seem for ever! Nor did the teaching and words of his ghostly adviser differ much from the promptings of his own heart in this respect. The old sins were, the confessor was confidently assured, entirely repented of. Of course they were, when for long years past no temptation to the repetition of them had existed. And absolution on all these heads was duly and fully accorded. But then came this knot of the difficulty. The old man had not forgiven his son. It was true that he was miserable because he had *not* forgiven him—would only be too happy to forgive him, on due submission made. But there was still that at the inmost heart of the strong-willed and masterful old man that made free forgiveness, coupled with the knowledge that his son was to be left free to follow his own devices on the subject which had sat so near the old man's heart, that made the needful frame of mind impossible to him. And the exact state of the case was as plain to the trained moral pulse-feeling of the skilled confessor as if it had all been written on the penitent's forehead. The priest, as it happened, was an earnest and scrupulous man; and he could not feel himself justified

in telling his penitent to depart in peace, unless he could succeed in first changing his heart in this respect. The old man writhed in his bed, and the sweat broke out in big drops on his furrowed brow. He wrestled hard. But the black drop was at his heart, and the evil will was too strong for him.

It seemed likely that his passing would be like that of Lorenzo de' Medici when Savonarola required of him, as the condition of absolution, that he should, so far as his will went, restore liberty to Florence. All else the dying tyrant could accord. But that was beyond him. And he turned his face to the wall, and died unannealed.

To the old smuggler the case was a hard one. The probing of the good priest was too searching for him! He too turned his face to the wall; but the faithful soul-physician did not give up his struggle with Satan.

Just at that conjuncture hurried steps of several persons were heard from the cloisters below. And in the next minute the old nurse came into the room, saying that one of the neighbours urgently desired to speak to the dying man. The tidings he brought were to the effect that the ship in which young Jacopo Parravich sailed had been signalled from Malamocco. He knew the fact from the broker under the Procaratie Vecchie, to whom the vessel was consigned. The real discoverer and sender of the news was old Pietro Ponti, the fisher-

man, Ninetta's father, who had heard of the ship's arrival an hour or two ago from a boatman who had just come in from the Lido with difficulty through the storm. But he knew too well that it would not be wise for him to be the bearer of the news. So he sent it to the dying father by one of his neighbours.

Yes, Jacopo's ship and Jacopo were at Malamocco, the port at the entrance of the lagoon. But there was not the smallest chance that the pilot would dream of attempting to bring the vessel into the lagoon and to Venice in the face of the tempest that was then raging. No doubt by the evening of the following day she would be anchored in front of the Riva degli Schiavoni. But old Jacopo felt all too surely that that would be too late for him!

"What is it to me," said the old man bitterly, "whether he is at Malamocco or at the world's end? One is as far off as t'other such a night as this; . . . and I shall never see the morning! If I could but see him, I" The unhappy man turned wearily in his bed, and moaned aloud.

Zerlina had accompanied the bringer of the news to the door of her father's room, and comprehended the whole of the circumstances and bearing of the situation in a moment. A sudden thought dashed through her brain. But it was a thought that first caused the tide of her blood to rush violently to her

neck, her cheeks, her forehead, till she felt it tingling in her ears, and at the roots of her hair, and then as suddenly to retreat to the heart, leaving her fair oval face as white as marble beneath the glossy braids of her dark hair.

Was there no possible way by which her brother might be brought to that bedside before to-morrow's dawn, when so much, so terribly much for the eternal weal of the one man and for this world's happiness for the other might depend upon that meeting? *No way!*

Zerlina thought there might be one possibility—one, and one only! But the thought, as has been seen, was not one that commended itself to easy and welcome acceptance.

Zuan Contarin could take his gondola to Malamocco, and bring back her brother in four or five hours! If there was not another gondolier in Venice who would attempt the task, Zerlina felt the most perfect assurance that Zuan could do it, . . . and *would* do it . . . if she chose to ask it of him.

Ay, but *could* she bring herself to do that asking? She had been cruel to him at their last meeting. It had been the evening of a festa—a rare holiday for Zuan. And, dressed in all his best (and how handsome Zerlina thought he looked!), he had timidly proffered his petition to be allowed to escort her to the Lido, where there were to be gala doings

and fireworks. But Zerlina had tossed her head, and told him that it was quite out of the question; she was engaged to go with Signore Marco Tron. He was the son of a rich jeweller, who wore broad-cloth and a chimney-pot hat, which was certainly more fitted than a poor man's jacket to consort with Zerlina's holiday muslin dress, and killing little hat, and boots with heels as high as any lady's in the land. Poor Zuan had slunk away, and watched her privily as young Tron led her to a gondola. And Zerlina had caught sight of him, and with a toss of her head had instantly begun talking and laughing with her companion with every appearance of the utmost enjoyment. And what a bore she had found young Tron! And now, as the punishing idea suggested itself to her mind for an instant of the amount of help that could be got from *him* in her present strait, ah! how ineffably contemptible and null he seemed to her in comparison to her lover of low degree!

But, after all this (and much previous treatment of the same sort), *could* she go to Zuan, and ask him to do this thing . . . for her sake? *For her sake!* For though her confidence was boundless in Zuan's prowess and skill, she knew well enough that the task was not one which any human being in Venice would undertake save for some such motive as that which she well knew "for her sake"

would be to Zuan. Could she bring herself to do this?

Reserving the reply to this question for yet farther consideration, during the walk she meditated, and whispering to herself, "For life and death! for life and death! for more than life and death! for poor old father's soul!" she hurriedly put on her cloak, tied a handkerchief over her head, and quietly slipped out of the house, saying no word to any one, and unnoticed by any.

She knew well where Zuan was to be found. He lived with his widowed mother, who was the portress and care-taker of a huge old empty palace in one of the little "campi" behind the Riva degli Schiavoni, as the long quay is called which faces the island of St. Giorgio Maggiore and the lagoon. The owner of the once splendid, but now dilapidated, house in question lived in Paris, and old mother Contarin had for many years had the care of it. And her son had the advantage of gratuitous lodging in the rooms on the ground-floor occupied by his mother. She might have lodged half a dozen more sons there, if she had had them, without any injury done to the owner, or objection on his part. And on such a night as that Zuan was very sure to be at home. It would have needed a long walk for Zerlina to reach the part of the town to which she was bound at a period a few years earlier, for she would have had to go all round by

the Rialto, seeing that not a man at the "traghetto" would have attempted to pull her across the Grand Canal.

But the much-abused iron bridge, raised by an English engineer and speculator, in the immediate neighbourhood of the far-famed Gallery of the Belle Arti, stood her in good stead, though she almost thought she should have been blown off it as she crossed. Holding hard on to the rail, she made the passage, however, in safety, and found herself at the door of old Anna Contarin's porter's lodge almost sooner than she wished. For her reluctance to the task before her was extreme, and she had made no progress in determining in what words she would put the matter before her lover.

"Madrè di Dio!" exclaimed Zuan, coming to the door, "la Signorina Zerlina! on such a night as this!"

"What has happened, *ragazza mia*?" said the old woman, who knew too much of Zerlina's treatment of her son to wish to be specially civil to her. "You look as if you had seen the ghosts of all the unbelieving Jews who lie buried on the Lido! You are as white as any ghost yourself. In God's name what is the matter?"

"Father is very ill," said Zerlina, catching at the chance of addressing herself in the first instance to the mother instead of to the son;

"he is so ill that he is dying. The doctor says that he cannot live through the night."

"Cospetto! And he looking but the other day as if he would live for a hundred years!" exclaimed the old woman.

"If I had only known that there was trouble in your home, Signorina Zerlina! To think of your coming out such a night as this! But of course you are wanting help. Shall mother go with you to help nurse Signor Jacopo? Only say what we can do to be useful to you. Ah, Zerlina! don't you know that I would give my eyes to have the pleasure of serving you?"

"Father sent me, Signor Zuan," began Zerlina, who was now as violently red as she had been white before, "father sent me to say . . ." Then, suddenly struck by the unworthiness of such a pretence, and of the feeling that prompted her to wish to obtain the services of Zuan on any ostensible terms save those which were in very truth to be the price of them, she checked herself; and becoming yet more scarlet in the face, and casting her eyes on the ground, added, "No! not that! poor father! he is too ill to do that, . . . but . . . he is sadly, terribly in want of what no one but a gondolier, such as is hardly to be found in all Venice, can do for him, and . . . and I thought . . ."

"A gondolier! Eccomi! of course you know that anything one of my trade could do"

"To serve a dying man for his soul's welfare?" said Zerlina, venturing a glance up into his eyes.

"His soul's welfare!" said Zuan, with a curious air of mixed reverence and disappointment. "Be it what it may, Signorina Zerlina, I am ready. Only say what is needed."

"Poor Jacopo is come back! His ship is signalled. She lies in Malamocco harbour. You know how father and he parted. Father can't bring himself to forgive him; and the priest will not give him absolution. And . . . oh, if Jacopo could only come to him before it is too late! Father said, as he lay moaning fit to break your heart, 'if only he could see him!' But father will be dead before morning."

And Zerlina dropped her head upon her bosom, and looked fixedly on the ground.

"If he can't live till morning, and a bit longer," said the old woman, "he'll never see Jacopo again, that's certain. As well be at Smyrna as at Malamocco such a night as this. You don't suppose the ship is going to come in to-night, do you?"

"But Jacopo may be fetched! To be sure! That's what a gondolier can do! Of course! In five hours from now, Signorina Zerlina, Jacopo shall be here," said Zuan with joyous alacrity,

preparing instantly to set about the task before him. "The gondola is at the riva!" he added.

"Are you mad, stark mad?" cried the old woman, "and are you not ashamed, girl, to come here tempting an only son to risk his life? You who"

"Hush, mother! Risk my life? Not a bit of it! But if it were to risk my life" Here he shot a glance at Zerlina's face, the magnetism of which was too strong for her to avoid a momentary raising of her eyes to meet his. . . . "And for the sake of a passing soul!" added Zuan, with a tone of pious awe.

"A passing soul! For the sake of a white face and a pair of brown eyes, which were always too proud to look on you, you poor fool!" cried his mother. "You mean thing!" she went on, turning to the trembling girl; "how can you have the face to ask such a thing, and yet not the honest heart to say to a lad that worships you, —the more fool he!—'for my sake, *amor mio!*'"

"Hush, mother!" cried Zuan, now as red as Zerlina.

"It is for my sake, Zuan!" said Zerlina with tremulous lips, and not daring to look up. She had never called him simply Zuan before.

Zuan snatched her hand and pressed his lips upon it. "In five hours Jacopo shall be in Venice!"

"You shall not go!" screamed his mother.

"Not all hell should stop me! Mother, dearest mother, there is no danger beyond a wet skin. I shall be here long before morning. I promise it to you."

And with that he opened the door, and prepared to step out into the storm, which appeared to be raging worse than ever. Zerlina, without saying another word, stepped towards the door, as to accompany him.

"It is all in your way to the cloister, Signorina Zerlina. I can at least see you so far home," said Zuan, shutting the door behind him, as they both stepped out into the night; "and then"

"But I must go with you in the gondola, Zuan," said Zerlina, as she gathered her cloak about her.

"You! to Malamocco! this night! No! that will never do! Not for a million crowns! No, Signorina Zerlina; you must go home. I shall bring Jacopo to you."

"But is there then danger danger to life, Zuan?" asked Zerlina, taking his arm for the first time with a hand that he felt to tremble on it, though the force of the tempest might have been a sufficient excuse for doing so before.

"Danger? well it is not a pleasant night certainly—not a night for such as you,

Signorina, to be on the lagoon. Besides, it will be better to have no passenger in the boat. I shall take a spare oar for Jacopo coming back; . . . and perhaps I may find at the riva a friend who will go with me. Two oars are better than one. But for you! No, Signorina, I can't take it upon myself to do that!"

"Please, let me go with you!" said Zerlina, with just the slightest pressure of her hand on his arm, and in a submissive tone of entreaty that seemed to Zuan's ears to alter very strangely the relative situation of both of them towards the other. For a moment he was beset by a strong temptation to accede to her request. The extraordinary monstrosity of a set of circumstances that should bring it to pass that Zerlina should sue to him, and he refuse her prayer, joined to a sudden imagination of the joy of having her under his protection, his alone in all the world, out on the wild lagoon, saving her life perchance with his strong arm around her, almost made him waver. But in the next instant good sense, the consciousness of what was right, and of what was best for her, returned in their full force, and enabled him to say—

"No, Signorina Zerlina, that cannot be; I should be doing very wrong. I don't look to any mischief. But . . . the gondola may capsize. I should not be much the worse if it did," he hastened to add, as he felt a tremor of her arm and a nervous

clutching of her hand; "but if I failed to save you!"

"Zuan! If you don't come back I should not care to live."

"Jacopo shall be brought back safe and sound, Signorina Zerlina," returned Zuan, cruel this time in his turn to the girl, who, in the stress of the moment, had cast her girlish pride of coquetry so far behind her.

"Zuan!" said Zerlina, still more palpably pressing his arm, and adding no further word. It was not said in a tone of remonstrance, but of such gentle, humble, loving appeal that to her lover's ear it was as good as a thousand.

"Zerlina!" he said. It was the first time he had ever so addressed her; and the word was unmistakably replied to by another pressure of the arm.

"I am to go with you, Zuan, ... now and" The word that should have followed died on her lips.

"Not on the lagoon to-night, Zerlina! my love, my life, soul of my life, my treasure, my best and dearest!" he cried, hurriedly rushing on the words with his tongue suddenly loosened. "See, my own treasure! here is the riva. My gondola is under that bridge. Do not let us lose time. You make haste home to your father, and tell him Jacopo will soon be here. And leave the rest to me."

"You are the master, Zuan!" she said submissively, and turned away to go. But she had not gone three steps before she turned, and again coming to his side, said:

"Zuan, I am afraid! I begin to wish that I had not asked you to do this thing. If . . . if you should . . . not come back . . . I would give almost anything that father should see Jacopo before he dies; but not even for that would I lose you!"

She looked up into his face through the darkness as she stood by his side. It was almost an invitation. Had it not seemed so Zuan would not have taken the advantage which the situation made for him. As it was, he threw his arms round her and pressed one long kiss, with all his soul in it, on her lips, and then turned quickly away towards his boat, saying:

"Now, my own, my own love, I am strong enough for anything! Have no doubt, Zerlina. In five hours you will see me again."

Zerlina found her way back to the little dwelling in the cloister more slowly than she had come thence, musing, despite the tumult of the storm around her, and not upon the subject, near as it was to her heart, which had occupied her thoughts as she came.

Zuan jumped into his boat, and pushed out at once into the lagoon, taking no heed of the exclama-

tions and questions of the few bystanders, who, with the constant interest of seafaring people in a storm, were standing on the riva. He made no attempt at getting any companion in his enterprise, as he had spoken of doing. He had never really intended anything of the kind. He knew too well that no inducement he had to offer would suffice to tempt any gondolier in Venice to share his task. He had only spoken of such a thing to tranquillise his mother and Zerlina. But he did take a second oar, for he reckoned on the assistance of Jacopo in coming back. Fortunately it would be on the return that the assistance was most needed, for on going out he had the tide with him. Nevertheless, the low water was a source of difficulty, for it was only by the greatest exertion and by watchful vigilance that he could avoid being blown by the wind upon one of the shoals which make the navigation of the lagoon so intricate. And this danger was added to by the pitchy darkness of the night. Nothing but such a life-long acquaintance with every inch of the lagoon, as made the knowledge of the localities seem like instinct, could have availed to keep the gondola in its proper course. And with all his thorough knowledge and all the vigour of his manhood in its prime, Zuan soon found that he had undertaken to the very full as much as he could perform. He did, however, reach the *Divina Provvidenza*—that was the name of Jacopo's

ship—in safety at the end of two hours of such labour as he had never, even in a racing struggle, undergone before. The active and skilled gondolier, having the tide with him, will, in ordinary weather, reach Malamocco in an hour. It was at the end of two long hours that Zuan, wiping the perspiration from his brow, jumped upon the deck of the *Divina Provvidenza*, to the extreme astonishment of her crew.

Meantime Zerlina had reached the shelter of the little cloister on her return. She found the nurse sitting at the bottom of the stairs, and the same knot of neighbours profiting by the godsend of a subject for endless gossip, which the event in process of completion upstairs afforded them. When would an Italian tire of sitting still, *al fresco*, and gossiping? Zerlina learned that her father had fallen asleep, utterly exhausted, and the priest had gone away, promising to return in a few hours. No questions were asked respecting Zerlina's absence. The gossips were too much engaged in their own amusement. She was wet through, and after pausing for a minute by her sleeping father's bedside, she went to change her clothes.

And all this time she found it impossible to bring her mind to bear otherwise than dreamingly, and, as it were, through a haze, upon the matters that had occupied it so entirely and so actively

before she had started on her expedition. It seemed as if everything in the world had changed, as far as she was concerned, and the most pressing interest of the passing moment seemed to be listening to the roaring of the storm, and striving to estimate the probabilities of its being on the increase or on the decline in the lagoons.

She stood at the window of her little room, which looked on to the Grand Canal, gazing out into the darkness, listening intently, and apparently dreaming, but, in fact, waiting—waiting with intense anxiety—till she heard, after awhile—she could not at all tell how long—voices in her father's room. He had waked from his troublous sleep—stupor rather than sleep—and the priest had returned.

“If Jacopo wanted my forgiveness, he would have come for it! Storm! what's the storm! The lagoons? a storm in a puddle!” moaned the old man, forgetting, in his unreason, that it was impossible that his son should know that he was dying.

Then there was a sudden running and trampling of feet in the cloister below; the priest stepped hastily to the door, and in the next minute returned to the bedside, saying, in distinct, calm tones:

“Jacopo is here. God, in his mercy, has sent him to you to receive your forgiveness and your blessing.”

And in another instant his son, with nothing but his trousers and shirt on, drenched with salt water,

and the perspiration streaming from his face, was on his knees beside the dying man's bed.

"Father, you will forgive me! You will give me your blessing!"

The dying man moved his shaking hand with difficulty, and succeeded in laying it on the wet, dark curls that covered his son's head.

"Jacopo!" he said. "Yes, it is Jacopo! If you will promise me, my son"

But here the priest broke in, strongly and resolutely, speaking with all the majesty of his office:

"Jacopo Parravich, God, in his boundless mercy and goodness, has allowed your son to come to you, that your soul may be saved from the perdition of passing to his judgment with the hideous guilt of an unnatural curse blackening your whole heart. And you make conditions! Man, dying man, who, in a few minutes, will stand before your Judge, you make conditions with God! Miserable sinner, accept the mercy offered to you. Let the blessing of peace, of charity, and of love enter your heart. Your son has risked his life to come to you. Take him to your heart, while the time is yet spared to you!"

Jacopo insinuated his arm beneath his father's head, and round his neck. In doing so his dripping shirt-sleeve touched the old man's lips.

"Salt water!" said the old smuggler. "Why, boy, you have been under water!"

"Pretty nearly, father. Zuan Contarin and I had a hard job to cross the lagoon. It was he that brought me to you. Without him I should not have known how it was with you."

"Zuan Contarin! Zuan with his gondola! Is Zuan here?" said the old man, striving to raise his head from the pillow.

Zerlina was standing at the bed-head on the farther side, and looking across it, had, from the beginning of this scene, marked her lover, who, taller by half a head than any of the others, was looking into the room from behind the little knot who were gathered at the door.

"Zuan Contarin is here, father," she said, bending down her head to whisper in his ear.

"Zuan Contarin!" said the dying man. And Zuan, coming forward, stood by the side of Jacopo at the bedside. "Zuan," continued he, gasping, "you are a brave lad! You have done me a good turn at sore need. I could have done as much once; but the lagoon *is* ugly such a night as this. I know your terms for the job, my lad. Zerlina, give him the reward he has earned."

"Here is Jacopo, papa Parravich, your son!" said Zuan, with rare thoughtfulness for others rather than himself. But his eyes were free to ask and receive Zerlina's obedience to her father's commands.

"God bless you, Jacopo, my son! It was good

of you to come to me. And oh, father (to the priest), what a difference there is here!" striking his bosom as he spoke. "Zuan, Jacopo, Zerlina, God bless you, my children!"

HOW MEO VARALLA WON HIS FIRST LOVE.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE "BOTTEGONE."

"I won't say 'Yes,' and I won't say 'No!' And, what is more, I won't promise to say 'Yes,' even if you get the job, and are as successful with it as you promise yourself. But I *will* promise to say 'No,' in the most negative manner possible, if, as seems to me likely enough, you don't get it!"

The speaker was Signor Giuseppe Marini, the "farmacista," or chemist and druggist, who kept a "farmacia" at the sign of the zodiacal "Scales," at the corner of one of the streets opening into the Piazza del Duomo at Florence. And the person he addressed was a remarkably handsome young man, with curly brown hair, a good blue eye, and a splendid bright-brown beard, cut in a point—not

in the mean-looking imperial fashion appropriately called "a goatee," but more after the manner of our old Elizabethan gallants.

And the *locus in quo*—the place where the conversation, of which the above sentence formed the climax, took place—was the space in front of the large café, known to all the Florentine world as the "Bottegone."

The word *bottegone* means, simply, a big shop; and certainly the establishment in question is a very big shop in summer, when, according to immemorial custom in the City of Flowers, it extends itself over a large space of the flagstone of the Piazza del Duomo—the open space that surrounds the grand and truly matchless masses of the church that Brunelleschi and Arnolfo da Lapi built in obedience to the commands of the Signory of Florence, which ordered that a building should be raised such as the world had never seen before!

It must be confessed, that the architects who raised that congeries of domes, which looks as if it had grown in obedience to some interior organic law of perfect beauty, rather than been heaped together by mortal hands, bettered their instructions; for they produced a monument of which it could not only be truly said that the world had never before seen its equal, but of which it may now be said, that it has never since seen any so truly perfect!

There stands the mighty fabric, sleeping in the soft moonlight as tranquilly as the eternal hills; there are the vast marble steps at the west front of it, where the Florentine *monde* used, in the simple olden time, to go *aal marmi*, as they call it—go to sit on the steps on the warm summer nights, because there is always a cool breeze there; and there, hard by, near the north-western corner of the Piazza del Duomo, is the “Bottegone.” It is no such very big shop in the winter, when it confines its business within its doors; but on a summer night, many a square yard of the pavement in front of these doors is occupied by a crowd of little tables and chairs and forms; and the “Bottegone,” thus quietly appropriating to its own uses a *quantum suff.* of the public domain, becomes a very big shop indeed—a very big shop, and a very pleasant one, with the cloudless star-spangled sky overhead, and the huge masses of the opposite church lying in alternate bright white moonlight and deep black shadow before one’s eyes. A pleasanter place for an evening coffee and cigar, or ice, or lemonade, it would be difficult to find on a hot night. And if any stray Englishman, so far out of his countrymen’s usual course as to find himself in Florence in July, and having a vision of Regent Street in his eye, and a sound of “Move on!” in his ear, should ask by virtue of what right the coffee-house keeper thus transferred his business to the public thorough-

fare and compelled all passengers to make a long circuit round his tables and benches, he would be utterly unintelligible, not only to the frequenters of the "Bottegone," but also to the public, which placidly permits itself to be turned out of its path, and would only succeed in proving himself an insular barbarian !

At a certain table in this *al fresco* department of the "Bottegone," Signor Giuseppe Marini, the *farmacista*, was to be found every summer evening from nine to ten. No native Florentine would have ever thought of looking for him anywhere else at that hour; but if any stranger, unacquainted with the ways of Florence in general, and of Signor Marini in particular, had chanced to want the *farmacista*, he would have little difficulty in finding him, for the *farmacia* at the sign of the "Libre" was at a very little distance in the piazza.

Signor Giuseppe Marini was generally deemed to be a very warm man. He looked so, indeed, on the July evening in question, for he had loosened the voluminous white kerchief round his neck, and taken his hat from his head, and had evidently been made hotter than the July air would needs have made him, by the discussion of which the closing words have been given above. But it is not altogether in this sense that Signor Marini was a "warm man;" he had kept the

farmacia, at the sign of "The Scales," for more than thirty years, and was understood to have made money. He looked like a man who had made money—a dry little old man, with thin lips, and shrewd, cold, grey, calculating eyes.

Every night in the year Signor Giuseppe came to the café—out-of-doors, on the piazza, in the summer, and within the walls in winter; and all the evening hours which he did not pass at the café he passed in his shop, chatting or playing a game of cards with the medical men who sat there awaiting a summons from some patient, or with others of the gossips who used to make his shop their haunt every evening. It is a common custom in Italy, specially in its smaller towns, thus to make the shop of the chemist and druggist serve for a *salone di conversazione*. Probably the old-world practice which still prevails there in the medical profession, of practitioners sitting in the druggists' shops as places of call, where they may be found when wanted, has led to the habit.

But it may be remarked, that surely this habit on the part of the lords of the creation of passing every evening of their lives away from their own domestic firesides (only that Italians have no firesides) must make very solitary lives for the ladies of their families. Not so, always. Not so as often, perhaps, as might be expected by Teutonic-

minded folks. It had not that effect in the case of the Signora Dorotea Marini, the wife of Signor Giuseppe, the *farmacista*.

The Signora Dorotea was many years younger than her husband, having seen not more than thirty-eight summers at the time here spoken of; and though not the slightest trace remained of the graceful slenderness of figure that had once constituted, in her own estimation, the most invincible of her personal charms, and she had become, indeed, very much the reverse of slender, she had acquired the conviction that it is quite a mistake to suppose that there is anything really attractive in a sapling-like figure; and was happy in the persuasion that the vivacious bright-black eyes, glossy black curls, full red lips, brilliant white teeth, superb and snowy shoulders, plump dimply little white hand, and foot to match, which still remained to her, composed a *tout ensemble* of irresistibility quite enough for all the necessary purposes of life.

And there could be little doubt that her great and special friend, the reverend Canon Buti, was of the same opinion. It would be exceedingly wrong to conclude, from this perhaps reprehensibly careless way of speaking of the matter, that there was anything . . . well, that there was any reason, social, moral, or religious, why the Canon Buti should *not* visit the Signora Marini

every night of her life. And all Florence would have considered the slightest smile, or shrug, or other departure from the most innocent gravity of manner, on any occasion when the Signora Dorotea and the Signor Canonico happened to be mentioned together, as utterly calumnious, abominable, and in the worst possible taste. Nevertheless, if one saw them together, there was that in the Canon's manner and bearing which made it impossible to doubt that he had a very lively consciousness of being by the side of a very pretty woman—and But it is all nonsense! Good heavens! Why, if any testimony were needed for the utter refutation of any breath of scandal on the subject, was there not the well-known character of the lady—a strict devotee and most dutiful daughter of Mother Church, who never missed Mass or Confession, never dreamed of touching meat on a fast-day save under proper dispensation, and who burned five candles weekly at the shrine of the Madonna of the Seven Sorrows?

Such a man as his reverence the Canon Buti, too! Was it possible that scandal should attach itself to the name of such a man as that!—a man whose propriety of life and bearing, and whose social standing, rendered him the pride of the Chapter! For the Canon Buti was a person of independent property, and was a creditable man in these days

when, alas! the clergy are but too much recruited from the lower and poorer classes. It was a pleasure to see him bow with easy grace to the altar, as he stepped with dignified sweep across the choir to his stall. It was a greater pleasure still to see his bland well-formed features, portly person, and handsome silk-encased legs, stepping out with easy yet dignified vigour, as he passed, in the most irreproachable clerical attire, along the street. It was, in short, abundantly clear to all Florence that the Canon Buti was the very man to be the special friend of such a woman as the rich *farmacista's* handsome wife, and that *La Signora Dorotea* was the woman of all others whose devoted friendship was needed to such a man as the Canon. And "all Florence" very decidedly included that notable citizen of it, the worthy Signor *Giuseppe Marini*.

And those were the days, it must be understood, when "all Florence" knew all Florence, and what all Florence was doing!—pleasant quiet days in the little *Grand-Ducal* city, now departed, never to return! For Florence, as all the world knows, is now a great metropolis, with a population not only much more than doubled, but in a great measure strangers in the land, and strangers to each other—all which makes the state of society in the "City of Flowers" much more like what it is in other large cities, and quite unlike the old order of things, when almost the whole of the inhabitants of the

little town had been born under the shadow of Giotto's tower.

So that the gossips of the "Bottegone," who saw Signor Marini there night after night, knew well enough that he was not leaving the Signora Dorotea, his wife, to the dulness of a solitary evening. And if any of them had overheard, as he easily might have done, the words with which the farmacista closed his discussion with the handsome young man with the curly brown hair and large blue eyes, as above narrated, he would probably have known perfectly well to what the discussion had related.

And it is time that the reader should be made equally *au courant* of the subject in question, and of the state of matters connected with it.

CHAPTER II.

“A CHANGED WORLD, MY MASTERS!”

THE handsome youngster with whom Signor Giuseppe Marini was talking was Signor Bartolommeo (shortly Meo) Varalla, a young sculptor. And the subject of discussion between them had been nothing less than an outrageously audacious proposal on the part of the young artist, that he should be permitted to make Dianora Marini, the *farmacista*'s only daughter, his wife.

An audacious—indeed a monstrous proposition, in truth! For Meo Varalla was poorer than any church-mouse can be supposed to be in a country where there is such plenty of good candles on the altars and in the sacristies. Instead of seeking a place under government, at 8d. a day, rising to a sure competence of £32 a year in course of time, he had chosen to make himself an artist, and had—not till after some time spent in doubt upon the subject—at last determined to devote himself to sculpture. He had as yet done little—almost nothing—except

the busts of a few patrons, who had been induced to patronise rising talent by the chance of getting their heads immortalised at a cost very little exceeding that of the marble; and a few models of subjects in clay, which he never had been able to afford to put into marble, save one which had been commissioned by a shrewd English traveller, who had calculated that the day would probably come when the name of Bartolommeo Varalla would make the work he bought worth many times what he paid for it. This work—the statue of a young girl, with a palette and maulstick in her hand, standing before an easel and contemplating a small picture on it—had been exhibited, according to Florentine fashion, in the artist's studio for a few days before it was sent away to its destination, and had made a considerable impression on the public mind, and been much admired. But Meo was, none the less, still as poor as a Protestant church-mouse. And to think of his dreaming of marrying old Giuseppe Marini's daughter!

No wonder, indeed, that the well-to-do *farmacista* had declared that he would not promise to say "Yes" to such a demand, even in the case of the young sculptor's succeeding to the utmost extent of his sanguine hopes, while he declared himself fully determined to say "No," if the hopes in question were not realised. The wonder was that his rejection of the young man's

suit should not have been very much more decisive and peremptory.

As for Meo's audacity, the way he became guilty of it was in this wise. While still merely studying art in general, and feeling his way to that embodiment of it which was most in conformity with his own special gifts, Signor Marini had employed him to give lessons in drawing to his daughter Dianora. Nora had bothered his heart out about it; and it was always a great deal more difficult to him to say "No" to her than to say it to any other human being. It was her whim—her *beau idéal*—to study art! She would learn to draw! Why did not her parents find some steady-going, grey-headed married man for her teacher, since she must needs have one? Because steady-going, grey-headed masters would not have accepted such terms as poor church-mouse Meo was fain to be glad of. And Signor Marini had a frugal mind; and it never came into the pottering brain of the desiccated old druggist, that a church-mouse artist would dare to fall in love with Dianora Marini, his heiress!

But Dianora was beautiful as one of Beato Angelico's angels, and just the very girl, moreover, for an artist to fall in love with—full of poetry, and love of art, and romantic feeling herself! How could it be otherwise than that the young man should fall in love with her, though he had been in a more starved condition than ever church-mouse

was? And how, when he did get his first solitary commission, could he avoid making his work the portrait of the mistress of his heart and soul, seeing that her face and form were never for an hour absent from his imagination? And how could Dianora avoid feeling, when she, like the rest of the world, went to see his completed work ere it was sent away, that never since maidens were first wooed and won, had a declaration of love been so charmingly, so beautifully, so irresistibly made? And how was it possible that she should avoid being quite as desperately in love with Meo as Meo with her?

Stupid old desiccated herbalist! Just as if lads and lasses did not fall in love every day in the year on infinitely less provocation!

But surely it might have been expected that Dianora's lady mother, the Signora Dorotea, should have been more awake to the ways and tendencies of young hearts, than to have allowed her daughter to be exposed to such a danger! The fact is, you see, that ladies whose thoughts are very much occupied with their own charms, and the effect produced by them, are rarely wont to be very accurate observers or vigilant custodians of those of their daughters. And then, moreover, the Signora Dorotea fully thought, that all matters pertaining to hearts, and love, and wedlock, and so forth, had been finally and definitively settled, and arranged,

and done with in her daughter's case a couple of years before. For Nora was now eighteen, and at sixteen she had been engaged—as far, at least, as the purposes and intentions of her parents could engage her.

The state of the case was in this wise.

The property of the Signor Canonico Buti was situated at some distance from Florence, in the rich plain which lies around Pisa. Though small in extent, it produced much; for the alluvial soils that the Arno, the Ombrone, and the Serchio have washed down from the Apennine in the course of ages, and spread out in what was once the bed of the Mediterranean, are as rich when smiling with golden maize as they were malarious and pestilential in their original condition of unreclaimed salt-water marshes.

But the Canon Buti's land was not extensive enough to require the employment of a *fattore*, or bailiff, for itself alone. So it was placed under the care of the *fattore* of a much larger neighbouring property—a certain Giovanni Berni, whose broad-brimmed, low-crowned hat, broad rosy face, and broader red waistcoat, were well known in the markets of Florence, Pisa, Leghorn, Lucca, and Pistora. A very well-to-do man was Signor Giovanni Berni, the *fattore*—a rich man indeed, as *fattori* in Tuscany are very apt to become—the law of nature in this matter seeming to be that as the

landowner gets poorer and poorer, the *fattore* generally gets richer and richer.

Now Giovanni Berni, the *fattore*, had a son, the destined heir to all the fortune that had been built up during the long years of careful and judicious administrations, which had resulted in transferring the wealth of the Pisan corn-lands from lazy, ignorant, careless landlords to his careful, industrious knowing self. And it had come to pass, that the Rev. Canon Buti had taken the opportunity his intercourse with the *fattore* afforded him, to propose and negotiate a marriage between young Simone Berni, the *fattore's* son, and the Signorina Dianora Marini. And in essaying to bring about such a union the Canon had felt that he was doing a good turn to all the parties concerned. It was an eminently fitting and appropriate match. The rich agriculturist's only son would be just the husband for the rich druggist's only daughter. Money would be put to money in a quite comfortable and satisfactory way; and he, the Reverend match-maker, would have rendered an essential service to his near and dear friend the Signora Dorotea, and would certainly have established a fair claim to the gratitude of his *fattore*.

Nor, in making himself the medium of overture and negotiation in such an affair, did the worthy Canon in any degree quit the ordinary track of ecclesiastical practice and habits. Such match-

making, never undertaken, it must be rightly understood, by the mundane and reprehensible means of bringing the young folks together, or giving any opportunity for such vanities and dangerous frivolities as flirting and love-making—Heaven forbid!—but entirely by means of looking-up suitable alliances, and proposing them to and negotiating them with parents or guardians: such match-making as this is in Italy an eminently ecclesiastical function. Every family with any pretensions to respectability and standing is sure to have an intimate friend in some priest, who considers it his special province to advance the family interests in such ways.

It was quite in the proper and recognised order of things, therefore, when the Canon Buti opened to Farmer Berni his project of marrying young Simone to all the savings of the druggist's life of industry, and the negotiation had prospered. The match had seemed an eminently desirable one to all the parties concerned—save, indeed, to little Nora. But she was the last person whom any one of the high contracting powers would have dreamed of consulting in the matter! She was only sixteen—what should the child know of marrying or giving in marriage! And it was not intended that the union should take place immediately. Nora would have plenty of time to get used to the idea, and make up her mind

to the destiny prepared for her. And the Marini family, in company with his reverence the Signor Canonico, had made a visit to the fattore at the time of the vintage; and a Pantagruelian feast had been spread, at which the guests sate four hours; and the proposed bridegroom, got up in a style of blinding splendour, had been duly presented to the intended bride; and the Berni stores of house-linen, in sufficient quantities to have sufficed for half-a-dozen families for half-a-dozen generations, had been exhibited by the triumphant fattoressa Berni to the appreciative Signora Dorotea; and the Bernis had visited the Marinis in the Piazza del Duomo, and had partaken of the druggist's very much less abundant and expensive hospitality, and returned excellently well pleased with the thriving appearance of Signor Marini's business, and shrugging their shoulders at the comparative meagreness of their entertainment, with a "*Che vuole! Firenze non è la campagna!*"

So the matter appeared to be almost as good as settled, to the perfect satisfaction of everybody, with the exception of poor Nora, in whose heart and memory the traces of every hour of those fatal drawing lessons were as legible as ever, and were unceasingly read over and re-read over by her in imagination. Ah, poor child! how she remembered every word awakening her

intelligence, every eloquent look, every thrill of the all-too-consciously meeting hands, when the delicious but fearful feeling of awakening love had begun to substitute itself between them for friendly and admiring sympathy! How she remembered it all always, by day and by night; and how specially vivid the remembrance was, when Simone Berni stood before her, and uttered his clownish platitudes, spiced with a singularly nauseous flavour of third-rate city dandyism!

Simone Berni was a handsome young fellow, too, in his way: six feet in his stockings, and magnificently brilliant white, black, and red all about his head and face, and a curling black beard, that was the admiration of all the countryside. But all these advantages seemed to poor fancy-stricken Nora to render him absolutely loathsome to her. And she began, as the time went on, to contemplate the idea of closing her eyes for ever with Meo's arms round her, in an all-ending cloud of charcoal-fumes, as infinitely preferable to the fate of becoming the wife of Simone Berni!

Italian girls never used to meddle with, or think of, pans of charcoal, let them be required to marry whom they might. True; but matters are changing rapidly—were changing rapidly, in those last days of the old Grand-Ducal rule—in these respects. New ideas were, somehow

or other, spreading themselves infectiously among the rising generation. There were the elements of a new and changed moral sentiment in the air.

In the olden time all would have gone smoothly enough. Nora would have married the man chosen for her by her parents without dreaming of remonstrating; and in due course of time the man chosen by herself would have been her lover—her *cavaliere servante*.

But new revolutionary ideas had reached that pitch that little Nora really thought that a pan of charcoal, with Meo's arms round her, would be far preferable to marrying any other man in all the world save him.

CHAPTER III.

“MUCH VIRTUE IN AN IF.”

SUCH being the circumstances of the case, it seems strange, on the first blush of the thing, that Signor Giuseppe Marini should not have replied to the representations of the young sculptor with a very much more decisive refusal than he did.

The fact was, that matters had become in some respects changed from what they had been at the time when Nora had been first engaged, or as good as engaged, to the son of the fattore. One change that had taken place was in respect to the somewhat bettered position of the young sculptor. And this brings us to the explanation of that reference of Signor Marini to the possibility of Meo's obtaining some commission.

“I won't promise to say ‘Yes,’ even if you get the job, and are as successful with it as you promise yourself,” the druggist had said.

Now, the “job” alluded to was this.

One of the results of the social and moral stirring in the Italian atmosphere which has been

spoken of, was a tendency to make political demonstrations out of the commemoration and glorification of those among the great ones of Italy's palmy days the story of whose lives involved any element of opposition to the then dominant tyrannies in Church and State. Statues were voted and erected to this and the other great name in several of the cities of Italy. And the sculptors, at all events, doubted not that this was the real and true method of regenerating the country.

Among other schemes of this sort, one was set on foot in Florence for raising a statue to Galileo. It had been originated by a committee of a very strongly-marked Liberal political colour. Some money had been collected, and it was understood that young Meo Varalla was engaged on a model, and that if, as was likely, he should succeed in pleasing the leading members of the committee, he would, in all probability, be selected for the execution of the work. But when matters had been in that position, several persons began to bethink themselves that it was not well—perhaps even dangerous—to leave the putting-up of such a statue altogether in the hands of such thorough-going Radicals as those who formed the committee for the new Galileo memorial. Who knew what they might do—how they might compromise the country? It was a ticklish subject, Galileo . . .

might, as one sees, easily be treated in such a manner as to involve an open insult to the Church! A scroll with "*Eppur si muove*" on it; an arm upraised in denunciation; and, who knows, perhaps a three-cornered sacerdotal hat under the philosopher's foot! A pretty sort of thing! And with that hot-headed, red-hot enthusiast Varalla at work on the model, you may swear it will be something of the sort!

There's no objection to be made to a statue to Galileo. "*Anzi!*" Quite the reverse, if it is only done in a proper way; and the best way will be just to take the thing out of these fellows' hands. We can very easily put together a much larger sum of money than they have been able to collect. Let us start an opposition committee, and put up a statue ourselves.

So an opposition committee sprang into existence, whose principal object was to insure that the proposed Galileo memorial should be intrusted to an artist who could be depended on to treat the subject in a manner that would not be offensive to good churchmen. And inasmuch as there is some subtle law of nature, which ordains that moderate order-loving politicians shall always be much more moneyed men than your enthusiastic idea-worshipping Radical, the opposition committee were soon able to advertise themselves as in command of a very much larger sum than that which the patrons

of poor Meo Varalla had at their disposition. And thus it soon became pretty clear, that if anything were really to be accomplished in the way of erecting such a statue as had been proposed, it must be done by a fusion of the two committees. If the Radical committee abandoned the matter, the other party, having so far attained their object, would let the matter go to sleep and nothing would be done. If the Radicals still strove to act independently, their opponents would be certainly able to prevent them from obtaining a sufficient amount of subscriptions; and in that case, also, the probability would be that nothing would be done. It was obvious, in short, that a fusion was the only plan. But if this policy were adopted, Meo Varalla's chance of obtaining the commission was very much lessened indeed. And it was *such* a chance for him!—his only chance it seemed to him. And it would be the making of him! And he had got the idea in his mind, and in his mind's eye. He knew that he should succeed, if only he could be allowed a fair trial. The work stood before him completed, in his dreams. It ousted even the vision of Dianora from some of his waking hours. The joy, the agony, the fever of creation was upon him! If only his Galileo could once fight its way into existence in the marble, he should be placed in a position in which he might fairly hope to win his Dianora for his own.

The truth was, however, that he never would have had the ghost of a chance of winning her, whether he got the commission for the "Galileo" or not, had other matters remained altogether as they had been at the time when the match between Dianora and the son of the *fattore* had first been proposed. But matters were not in the same position; and circumstances had occurred which had the effect of leading Signor Giuseppe Marini to think that it might be as well not to reject the son-in-law who so eagerly begged for that position too utterly and finally.

In fact, Signor Giuseppe Marini was not by a great deal so rich a man as he had been when the negotiation with the *fattore* had been opened. It was not so much that the business of the *farmacia* at the sign of "The Scales" had gradually fallen off of late years. This had been so, undeniably. There had come from "perfidious Albion" a man with English education, English energy, and English capital, who had taught the Florentines to want drugs of a very different quality, and to be served in a very different way, from what had contented them in the good old time. Signor Giuseppe Marini at the sign of "The Scales" was behind the times, and lost ground daily. But this was far from being the worst. Finding that the *farmacia* was bringing him little or nothing, Signor Marini had been induced to turn his attention to other

things, in the hope of making up the deficiency. Speculation in mines was rife at that time in Tuscany. Very large fortunes had been made in one or two instances; and over a considerable extent of the hill-country of Tuscany indices of the presence of various minerals, especially copper, were not wanting. In an evil hour, Signor Marini had been induced to join one of the small associations which in those days were attempting a short-cut to fortune with little capital and no experience. The result had been losses very much heavier than any which the druggist had contemplated as at all on the cards when he entered into the speculation.

And, to make matters worse, Signor Giuseppe had shrunk from telling his wife any of these disastrous circumstances, which, as he well knew, would have been the same thing as taking his reverence the Canon Buti into his confidence. And that the druggist was very unwilling to do. In a word, poor Signor Marini was the victim of all those terrible annoyances and difficulties which arise from living with the reputation of being a much richer man than one really is!

And the consciousness of this led the druggist to modify his tone towards Signor Meo Varalla. It might well turn out that Signor Meo might not be so undesirable a son-in-law, after all—nay, it might turn out that he was the only son-in-law available, so far as the future had as yet disclosed itself; for

it was very much to be feared that Signor Giovanni Berni might be disposed to cry off, when he came to discover the real state of the case. Signor Giuseppe was well aware that the state of his affairs and fortune would be very closely looked into by the *fattore* and his son. And he had not the least doubt that if such investigation led to any notable disappointment they would decline the hymeneal bargain, promptly and decisively, as they would decline to complete any other bargain under similar circumstances; whereas, on the other hand, this hot-headed romantic lad of a sculptor would jump for joy to take his girl without any assurance that he should ever get a sixpence with her.

Still, it would not do to give his Nora to a beggar. And really, if Meo should fail in getting this important commission for the "Galileo," there was but faint prospect of his being anything else. Let him get *that*, and make a great success of it, and the whole aspect of the case was entirely altered. It was not only that there would be an important sum to start with, but the young sculptor's name would be up. Commissions would come in in plenty; and the trade of a sculptor who has plenty of such is by no means a bad one. It is likely to be a far more lucrative one than even that of the most successful painter; for the latter can only, in these days at least, make money of the work of his own hands. He may conceive a hundred pictures; but

if he could have orders for them all, his possibility of production is limited by the hours of slow patient toil which it is possible for him to devote to the putting of his thought on the canvas. It is not so with the sculptor. For him the mere drudgery of the work is done by others—much more, indeed, than what can fairly be so termed is done for him. He conceives the work, puts his creation into the plastic clay, and meaner hands do all or nearly all the rest.

Yes, if our friend Meo could get the commission for the “Galileo,” and make a success of it, it might do—better even, perhaps, than a marriage with the rich fattore’s son.

IF! Ay, *if*. All depended on that “if.”

CHAPTER IV.

LOVERS' VOWS.

THE motives, then, which led Signor Marini to reply to the young sculptor's arguments in favour of his suit in the doubtful manner that has been seen, are clear enough. But all the difficulties with which the druggist had to contend, and all the obstacles which opposed themselves to Meo's hopes, have not yet been explained.

Although the reasons which have been stated had led Signor Marini to doubt very seriously whether it might not be best, after all, to give his daughter to Meo Varalla, La Signora Dorotea and her reverend friend the Canon Buti had no such doubts at all. They had in no degree wavered in their opinion that the match with Simone Berni was in all respects a most desirable one, and that the notion of giving Nora to a beggarly sculptor was utterly absurd, and not to be thought of. Of the many difficulties that were eating the poor druggist's heart out, and keeping him awake at night, and making him dread the moment when he should be

called upon to manifest the state of his affairs to the shrewd and wealthy *fattore*, they knew nothing. Signor Marini had never found courage to tell any of these troubles to his wife.

And then, on the other hand, La Signora Dorotea and the Canon had strong reasons for disliking the match with the sculptor, which Nora's father did not share. He was simply anxious to make what he considered the best—that is the richest—marriage he could for his girl. Her mother and the domestic Canon were also anxious that the best possible alliance should be secured for the druggist's heiress. They also were well inclined to consider that the richest husband was the best husband. And, knowing nothing of the difficulties there might be in the way of securing the *fattore*'s son, and utterly discrediting the idea that poor Meo's art would ever lead him even to a comfortable competence, they thought it evident that there could be no comparison between the two suitors in that respect.

But there were other motives, also, which rendered La Signora Dorotea and the Canon warm partisans of the one, and uncompromising enemies of the other proposal. The Canon had himself been the proposer of the first, and had, in some sort, promised his friend the *fattore* a well-endowed and beautiful girl for a daughter-in-law. And this went for something. But it was not all! This trouble-

some sculptor was an out-and-out Liberal, infected with all the new-fangled notions, which were then giving so much trouble in quiet sleepy Tuscany, and were threatening to give so much more! To give the girl to him was well-nigh as bad as giving her over to perdition! Especially with her romantic turn of mind, fancying herself in love too with the fellow, and ready to make all his hair-brained notions her own, there would be no chance that she might reclaim him! It would be all the other way! It would be a falling-off of her and whatever children she might have to the enemy and the foul fiend! The Canon Buti was a thorough churchman, and the Signora Dorotea was a devotee; and such an alliance was not to be thought of!

What maggot Signor Giuseppe, poor man! could have got into his head, that he should latterly have appeared half inclined to prefer this Meo Varalla to such an exemplary young man as Simone Berni, they could not imagine! There was no knowing what stuff he got his head crammed with at the café, or who might get hold of him to earwig him! To think that he should have been weak enough to listen to a parcel of trash about artistic glory and fame, and the thousands of lire that a poor starving artist was going to gain, all out of his own brain! *Misericordia!* A likely story.

One thing, however, was clear! Not even Signor Giuseppe, however much he may have been bitten

by all such stuff and nonsense, could dream of accepting the artist as his son-in-law if he failed in obtaining this commission, which was to be the foundation of his fortunes. Failing that, he not only was, but was likely to remain, a beggar ! If only it could be managed that he should not get the commission, it would be all safe ; and honest Simone Berni, who in thought, word, and deed always gave the Church her due, would walk over the course.

Poor Meo little imagined that his love for Dianora would operate potently against his succeeding in that great object, on which all his future depended !

But in a Catholic country, with society constituted as it was—rather than is—in Italy, there is no saying where the limits to the influence which a priest can exert can be drawn. The mode in which that influence can be exerted is so secret, so much apart from all the ostensible circumstances that govern human affairs—and at the same time the solidarity of churchmen is so perfect, the mutual help to be rendered to each other, in the attaining any object, is so thoroughly understood and acted on—that any man, let his line of life be what it may, is almost hopelessly weighted in the race who has the ill will and the ill word of the priest.

Meo Varalla bid Signor Marini “good night,” after those last sibylline utterances of the worthy

druggist, and left the café, while the old gentleman engaged in a game of dominoes with a neighbour. The druggist's family lived on the second floor of the same house in which the *farmacia* at the sign of "The Scales" was situated—a large building on the *Piazza del Duomo*, so close to the enormous fabric of the church that it remained in deep shadow, while a large part of the church, and of the piazza around it, were bathed in the moonlight—that Italian summer moonlight, which gives to the shadows all the blackness of the shadows at noonday!

Now, on quitting the café of the "*Bottegone*," Meo walked towards the Baptistry—in the opposite direction, that is, to that in which Signor Marini's house was situated. But when he had reached the western side of the Baptistry he turned so as to walk round it, passed by the foot of Giotto's tower, and in the broad moonlight all along the southern side of the cathedral, round the congeries of domed chapels which form the eastern end of the building; and so, coming round again to the north side of the church, approached the druggist's house. As he rounded the last towards the north of these chapels, he stopped within the shelter of a buttress, which cast a yet deeper shadow than that common to the whole northern side of the piazza, and looked up at an open window in the house opposite to him.

All the windows in all the houses were open, for

this was the hour for cooling the rooms with the fresh night-air, after shutting out the heated atmosphere during all the hours of the sun's stay above the horizon.

Evidently Meo's coming had been waited for by the inhabitant of the chamber he was gazing at; for there was an immediate movement of the muslin curtains, which hung over the whole space of the window. They were cautiously and timidly held apart, just sufficiently to allow him to see a pale face framed in the opening between them. He clasped his hands together, raising them towards the vision, and then drawing them in, and forcing them on his own breast, executed a pantomime, which expressed, quite intelligibly to the eyes that were straining down to him through the deep shadow, the thought of the embrace thus figured. And there was doubtless some answering gesture not less significant: for Meo, with a look of rapture on his upturned face, gave a little spring forward, as if he would have cleared at a bound the distance that separated him from that form behind the curtain!

Then there were movements of the muslin, that seemed to indicate that the person ensconced behind the curtain was carefully peeping, first up the piazza and then down it. The moment was propitious; there was not a creature within sight, save Meo in the shadow of the opposite buttress. Quick

from the corner of the window, scarcely visible as it descended along the dark wall of the house, descended a thread with a little something at the end of it. As soon as it was within reach from the ground, Meo, with an anxious glance in his turn, to assure himself that there was nobody on the piazza, darted across, seized a little black bag at the end of the thread, extracted from it a scrap of paper, and, quick as lightning, replaced it by another. The thread was again drawn up; and after one more exchange of ardent glances the prizes were carried off by the lovers, to be enjoyed in the nearest lamplight compatible with the needful privacy.

This is what Nora read :

“Treasure of my soul!” (it sounds a trifle *tall*, perhaps, in our homely tongue, but “*Tesoro dell'anima mia*” is pretty enough in *the dolce lingua* in which Nora read it,)—“Treasure of my soul!—

“What would I give to be where this happy bit of paper will be when you read it! What I am most anxious to tell you, my own darling, among all the things that I burn to whisper in that dainty little pink ear, is that I almost fancy that your father is becoming less hostile to our wishes. Heaven grant that I am right in thinking so! He declares that he will not say ‘No,’ if I should get the commission for my ‘Galileo.’” (It will be

observed that this was not exactly what the druggist had said; but the lover's sanguine eagerness had so interpreted it.) "And if any trust is to be placed in what my friends on the committee tell me, I think I shall have it! And, inspired as I am by you know what, and you know who, my sweetest darling, I do think that if I have this chance I shall make a success! I confess that I like what I have done. And oh! what would I give to show it to you, and have your opinion and advice! But this, I suppose, is impossible! Perhaps, if you could get out with your father, it might not be impossible to persuade him to come to the studio, suggesting it, not beforehand, but on a sudden, when you are out. Think of this, my own, own treasure!

"You are never absent from me in thought—never, never!—not even when my model is before me!

"Your own, own MEO!"

What Meo read was this:

"DEAREST AND BEST!

"I cannot tell you in what anxiety I live! No word is said to me on the subject. Even the old persecutions, and threats, and exhortations, have all ceased for some time past. But I am sure that bodes no good. I think they fear the possibility of papa's relenting if you get the commission,

and I am tormented with fear that something is going on with a view to frustrate this hope! Is it in any way possible that *anybody here* should have the means of influencing the decision on this subject? If so, for Heaven's sake, my Meo, be prudent!—be wary!—be vigilant! Perhaps, being warned, you may be able to make any intrigues of the kind I dread of no avail. Meo, my beloved! your poor Nora's life hangs on your finding the means of doing this! Adieu, my own! I have no fear of your beating down all opposition, if you are allowed a fair trial; it is the underhand intrigues to prevent your having it that I fear! God grant I may be over anxious!

“Your own NORA!”

Nora had scribbled these lines in her own room, by the light of the gas-lamp in the street, a few minutes only before she had conveyed them to her lover in the manner that has been described. And at the very time she was engaged in doing so, on the other side of the wall that separated her chamber from her mother's “saloncino,” the secret web of the schemes she dreaded was being woven.

CHAPTER V.

“AMORE PACIFICO.”

IF Signor Marini's habitual absence from his home had not the effect of condemning his wife to solitary evenings, it caused his daughter to pass many such. For Nora knew, as surely as if an unerring instinct had taught it to her, that her presence in her mother's sitting-room—her “saloncino,” as it was called, to avoid the pretentiousness of calling it a “salon”—was not desired or desirable when the Rev. Canon Buti was spending the evening with the Signora Dorotea; and as this was the case nearly every evening, Nora passed many more hours in solitude than it was good for her to pass. Fortunately, Nora was, unlike the immense majority of her contemporaries, a reader. Her mother probably would have been much shocked had she known how much of her daughter's time was thus spent. The possibility of such a thing never entered her head! She would doubtless have been more horrified still could she have known the nature of her daughter's studies; and her anger and dis-



may would not have been diminished if the further fact had been disclosed to her, that the pestilent young artist, who had been employed to teach her to draw because he could be hired cheaply, was in truth the main director of her daughter's studies, and that her books were mostly, if not entirely, of his recommending. Nor would it probably have reassured her at all, if it had been made clear to her that there was nothing among them all which the most careful of English mothers would have objected to see in the hands of her girl. As it was, however, Nora pursued her studies among her books and her pencils, interfered with only of late by long hours of reverie, which made her solitude very welcome to her.

In the "saloncino," meanwhile, on that evening on which Nora wrote her little letter to Meo, the Signora Dorotea and the Signor Canonico were sitting side by side on a sofa at the back of the room, while a little table prepared for supper stood near the open window. There was one of those tall Etruscan-shaped lamps, still peculiar to Tuscany, standing with two out of its three wicks burning on the table; but the farther part of the room, where the two friends were sitting, was in deep shade.

"I am a little uneasy, *cara mia*," said the Canon, taking the lady's fat little hand, and kindly patting it as he spoke, "about one or two things that have

dropped from Signor Giuseppe lately about Nora's marriage. I don't know what has come to Signor Giuseppe."

"Come to him! *Poverino!* what should come to him—except that he always hearkens to the last blockhead that has taken him by the button-hole! Poor dear man! he was always like that, and always will be," returned the lady.

"But, if we don't mind what we are about, we shall have trouble in the matter. He is capable of giving the child to that vagabond after all," said the priest.

"*O Dio buono! Misericordia!* A fellow without the price of a crust of bread to bless himself! It is not to be thought of," said the lady, with much vehemence of tongue, but not with a sufficient amount of agitation to make her either raise her shoulders from the comfortable nest they had hollowed for themselves in the cushions behind her, or withdraw her hand from the caressing action of her companion.

"Who is it that talks to him, do you think, down there?" said the Canon, indicating the shop beneath them by a glance towards the floor as he spoke.

"What! in the farmacia? *Che!* It is not there that the harm is done. That lad Pietro that you recommended is a very good boy; and if anything had been said in the shop, I should

have heard of it. *Che! che!* But it's that blessed café! Who knows whom he sees or what he hears there?" said Signora Dorotea.

"Of course, as long as the fellow *is* a beggar it is all safe enough. Signor Giuseppe won't give his daughter to a beggar! But if the fellow gets this commission, he won't be a beggar any longer. What a piece of stupidity and ill-luck it is that the idea of the statue should have come into the pumpkin head of some fool! What need was there to trouble ourselves about a statue to Galileo. Such nonsense—and mischievous nonsense, too!"

"Why, what can you expect, *caro*, in such times as these! I think the world is coming to an end, for my part. And the girl, too! To think of a daughter of mine wanting to throw herself away on a beggarly artist! *Jesu Maria!*"

"And my opinion is that she will have her way, too, if the fellow gets this unlucky commission. Ah! *cara mia*, Nora will never be what her mother was—and is—not if she were to live a thousand years!" said the Canon, with a tender look at the plump smooth face of the lady at his side.

"Does it seem so to you?" returned the lady, with a gratified simper. "But are not you one of those who will have to decide on the artist to be employed?" she added, smilingly.

"I am one of the committee—one of the second committee, *s' intende*, which was formed to prevent those Liberals from having the thing all their own way. I made myself one on purpose to have an opportunity of watching over Nora's welfare. And those other *caraglia* have no money among them, or very little. They cannot do the thing without us."

"*Ebbene?* Will it not be all right, then? You will give the job to somebody else. *Ecco tutto!*" said the lady.

"Yes; but that may not be so easy. The greatest number of those who have taken the matter up on our side, and who form our committee, care mainly for the thing in an artistic point of view. They want to make sure that the statue shall not be an indecency—an open insult to the Church. But if that is guarded against, they will think only of getting the best statue for their money."

"And is there any likelihood of this blessed Varalla producing the best statue?" asked the lady.

"Well, I am not sure that he may not. It is said that he has a real talent. I am not nearly so certain as I should like to be that he may not produce the best statue. But I have very great hope that he will treat the subject in some manner that will effectually prevent our friends from

accepting his work. He is sure to introduce some offensive allusion or other. The subject, between ourselves, lends itself so well to that sort of thing. In short, ... See, *cara*, whether I am not always thinking of your interests, which, in truth, are dearer to me than anything else, as they ought to be. . . . I have found the means of having a mode of treating the matter suggested to him, which would infallibly exclude his model from all consideration on the part of the respectable committee. A suggestion from a quarter that he is sure not to suspect, and that, on the contrary, will have the greatest weight with him! His old master—the man in whose studio he worked before he took a studio of his own. It was a master-thought!—an inspiration! *Ecco!* This master of his, Biraggini, is a cousin of well, never mind! of a very particular friend of mine. And Biraggini has been given to understand that if this young scamp's model is conceived in such-and-such a manner, the probability is that he himself may get the commission. Of course it is impossible that older men in the profession should like to see such a commission given to a lad young enough to be the son of any one of them. And Biraggini is a discreet man—a pious man, which unhappily very few of our artists are in these days! He is not likely to disregard a hint from

. . . . the person I have employed to speak to him; and I think Signor Meo is not likely to disregard his advice; and if that be so, and all goes well, we are all right!"

"*Caro Virgilio!*" (Virgilio was the Canon Buti's name) "what should I do without you! Truly you are our providence! *Una vera benedizione di Dio!* Would it be well, think you, that I should offer a light of seven candles at the altar of Our Blessed Lady in the chapel of the Duomo, with the intention of obtaining the grace that good Signor Biraggini should get the commission?"

"It is, in any case, a pious thought, *cara mia!* Yes—I would make the offering you speak of. The favour of Our Blessed Lady cannot be otherwise than desirable!" said the Canon, with unctuous gravity.

"*Diamine!*" said the lady.

The word—a very favourite one in a Tuscan mouth—is not an easily translatable one. The meaning is something to the effect of, "I should think so, indeed!" "Of course, there can be no doubt about that!"

A few days after the date of this conversation between the Canon and Signora Dorotea, the druggist received a very businesslike letter from Signor Giovanni Berni, the *fattore*, saying that, as the time was now drawing near when it would be well to think of carrying into execution the scheme

for an alliance between their children which had been projected, if it were to be carried out at all, he (the *fattore*) would, with Signor Marini's permission, give instructions to his lawyer, the Signor Dottore Aguti, to wait on Signor Marini for the purpose of learning from him the particulars of the Signorina Dianora's *dote* and expectations.

This letter fell like a clap of thunder on the poor druggist. No possible proposal could be less welcome to him than that a lawyer should be sent to question him just then about his financial condition and the state of his affairs. He would have given much to avoid such an *exposé*; and he was very sure that if any such examination were instituted just at that moment, no marriage between his daughter and young Simone Berni would result from it.

If he could manage to keep matters in suspense yet a little longer! If only he could manage to wait, and see the upshot of this affair of the commission for the "Galileo!" For Signor Marini's mind, tossed from one difficulty to another, had, though not quite avowedly to himself, in fact reached the conviction that, *if* Meo Varalla should get the commission, he could not do better than give his daughter to him. It is true he lived in no small fear of the Signora Dorotea and her reverend friend and counsellor. But what could he do? Which was the better—to have to confess to that

terrible tribunal that he was a ruined man, or not very far from being such—or to assert his will and pleasure to dispose of his daughter to the sculptor? Then a part of the blame of this latter course might be cast on Nora herself. There would be the excuse, as far as it went, of the difficulty and disagreeableness of compelling her to marry against her will. No doubt she was wilfully determined not to marry Signor Simone, and almost equally perversely minded to marry the sculptor. All that Signor Marini now admitted was, that he shrunk from forcibly constraining her inclinations. He knew, indeed, that such an excuse would not be worth much in the eyes of the Signóra Dorotea and the Canon; but it was much to have at least something to say.

The consequence of these meditations on the part of Signor Marini was, that a certain increased degree of intercourse took place between the father and the daughter; and the result again of this was, that on one Saturday night, when (as had grown to be with the lovers their nightly custom) the thread with the little black bag at the end of it was let down from Dianora's chamber-window, and was eagerly seized by the figure watching for it, springing out of the deep shadow of the cathedral buttress—the treasure of written scrap which it contained was read by Meo, with beating heart and glistening eyes, as follows:

“Do not fail to be at the studio all the afternoon to-morrow, dearest! I am to go out with papa, and I have some hope of getting him to go to the studio to see your model. You must not be disappointed, my own Meo, if we do not come; for I cannot promise. But I think you will feel sure that if *we* are disappointed, it will not have been the fault of your own, ever your own,

“NORA.”

CHAPTER VI.

A VISIT TO THE STUDIO.

It was not the custom of the Signora Dorotea to take her daughter with her to mass on a Sunday morning. Of course it is not to be supposed for a moment that Nora was constrained or permitted to neglect her religious duties; but . . . there are fitnesses of times, and places, and persons. It was not good for the Signora Dorotea—at least so she said, and said that her medical adviser said—to be very matutinal in her habits. And then . . . an early morning mass! It is all over in twenty minutes! One sees nobody—at least nobody to speak of! The Signora Dorotea had, all her life, laid to heart the precept which bade her let her light shine before men. She liked also that it should shine before women, especially of that sort which frequents the fashionable church of the Santissimo Annunziata at the eleven-o'clock mass. And then there was a certain feeling at the bottom of the Signora Dorotea's heart, which gave her the constant consciousness that a handsome well-preserved woman nearly approaching her fortieth year

was apt not to shine before men so brightly as she might otherwise shine if she had a far more beautiful daughter of eighteen, or thereabouts, by her side. And then, again, it was in every point of view proper that young folks should be matutinal. An early mass in the Lady Chapel behind the choir of the neighbouring cathedral was in every respect the proper thing for Nora, as evidently as the High Mass at the Annunziata at eleven was the proper thing for her lady mother.

So Nora always went, accompanied by an old woman, who had lived with the Marini ever since she was born, to mass at the cathedral at 7 A.M. There were very few people in the vast church at that hour—only a dozen or so of grey-bearded gaffers, and as many old crones. Not much for one's light to shine before! Nevertheless, it did so happen . . . the fact was, to tell the whole truth, that one day, when Meo had been speaking to Nora of Michael Angelo's magnificent but unfinished work, the "Pietà," at the back of the High Altar in the cathedral, little Nora—blushing scarlet in the most unaccountable manner as she spoke—told him that she knew that grand work better than any other piece of sculpture in all Florence, inasmuch as she passed before it every Sunday morning in going to mass in the Lady Chapel.

"And," said Nora, dropping her eyes to the ground, beneath their long lashes, "I see it in the

best possible light when the morning sun is streaming in at the eastern windows; for old Lucia and I go to the seven-o'clock mass in the chapel of the Madonna every Sunday morning."

What there could have been in such a statement to call up so bright a blush in Nora's cheeks it is hard to say. Certain it is, however, that her heart did beat in an unusual manner as she and old Lucia entered the church on the next Sunday morning, and undeniable that her eyes did for a minute or two—only for a minute or two—wander round the building in a manner that was not usual with her; and down went the eyes, with a jerk, as one may say, and were glued to her prayer-book, and that same unaccountable blush came back again more violently than ever! The old priest who performed the mass must have been, Nora thought, in a great hurry for his breakfast, for it seemed to her that the service was shorter than it had ever been before. She kept her eyes constantly bent down towards her book all the time; but anybody who could have seen the movements of them under the drooping lashes, would have fancied that their mistress was forgetting the direction in which the altar was, and mistaking for it the huge many-shafted column which stands at the entrance of the Lady Chapel!

And, in fact, as Nora and her attendant were quitting the church, just as they were passing by this same column, and while old Lucia was very

deliberately helping herself to holy water, and turning to make a reverence to the altar, a hand came out from behind the pillar, and grasped the little hand—that somehow or other happened to be held out a little loosely from the side in that direction—in a manner that not only caused that brilliant blush to come over her again worse than ever, but sent the blood tingling through every vein in her body in a way that made her feel, as she stepped across the Piazza del Duomo to her father's door, as if she did not know whether she was standing on her feet or on her head.

And thenceforward it had come to pass that every Sunday morning, unfailingly, the same hand had gone through the same performance at the same moment.

And sometimes, latterly, it had happened that certain scraps of written paper had been exchanged during that regularly-returning hand-clasp. And on the Sunday morning of which we are now speaking, when Meo had carried off the treasure thus gained, he found the words written: "Be sure to be at the studio! I think we shall come.—Your own NORA."

How, when, and where Signor Marini went to mass, nobody ever asked, and his family never knew. But he was always at home, like a good domestic man, for the early family dinner, at which the Rev. Canon Buti was on the Sunday an almost

invariable guest. And after dinner, on the occasion in question, the druggist signified that he was ready to perform his promise of going out with Nora. It was a mere formal compliment to ask his wife if she would join them. The Signora Dorotea was not much given to walking; and very much preferred being left to a little quiet chat, and perhaps a game of cards, with the Canon.

Signor Marini and his daughter, stepping out of the house on to the Piazza, turned naturally for their walk towards the Cascine. They thus crossed the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, and took the Via della Scala, which leads to the Porta à Prato. Now, Meo Varalla's studio was in the Via della Scala. All which circumstances Nora had gone over and over again in her mind when planning her little scheme.

"You said the other day, papa, that you should like to see Signor Varalla's model for his statue of Galileo. Why should not we go and look at it now, as we are passing by?"

"Eh? Well, yes! I want to see it. It seems to me as if he is likely enough not to get the commission, after all. And if he don't, you know, it is of no use at all, you see, Nora! Of course not, eh? You understand that! But what's the good of going on Sunday? He won't be there on a *festa*."

"I daresay he will be in his studio, papa—he is so industrious! And his heart must be so full of

his model. At all events we can but try, as we pass by."

And so Nora got her father to tap with his stick at the bell-less yellow door, on which was written, in black ink, "*Studio di Bartolommeo Varalla.*"

A sculptor's studio is not so picturesque a place—if one may say so without a platitude—as that of a painter. There are none of the quaint odds-and-ends of colour-making objects—bits of tapestry, fragments of rich ancient stuffs, specimens of antique weapons and armour, a piece or two of old-world furniture, one or two articles of harmoniously-coloured porcelain or Venice glass, and the like—which so frequently make the confusion of a painter's studio so picturesquely suggestive.

A few blocks of marble in the rough; a number of doubtless very artistic but not very pleasing-looking casts of limbs and hands and feet hanging up on nails in the wall; some sloppy-looking red earthenware basins full of muddy water; a few lumps of yellow sticky clay, two or three models in progress, looking ghastly under the towels and cloths with which they are covered to keep them moist, or hidden beneath huge cylindrical cases made of paper and wire: all these objects make up a furnishing for the work-place of the sculptor much less attractive to the visitor than that which surrounds the student of the sister art.

A sculptor's studio generally consists of a suite

of rooms. In those nearer to the entrance his workmen complete the translating of the master's thought into marble. In the last room, reached after the others have been passed through, is the artist's sanctum. There the clay grows into form in obedience to his conception; and the model is elaborated, to which only such visitors are admitted as the artist delights to honour, or deems capable of appreciating his work.

Signor Marini and his daughter were not kept long at Meo's door, as may be imagined. This visit was a great point for Meo. In the first place, there was the infinite delight, the delight of the artist as well as that of the man, in showing his work—the work of which he was proud, and of which he knew that she would be proud—to the girl he loved. But it was very important to him that Signor Marini should have come to visit his studio. He knew very well that mere artistic interest in his model would not have brought the druggist to his studio. Nor did he expect to gather from the opinion of Signor Marini any useful hint as to the probability of his work being accepted by the committee. But that Nora's father should have thought it worth his while to come to his studio, and to have brought his daughter with him, was a proof that the druggist was at least contemplating the possibility that the success of the work might be important to her and to himself.

He drew up the covering, which hung from a little pulley fixed in the ceiling over the model, and stepped back to watch the effect it should produce on Dianora.

At the first sight of it she turned perfectly pale, and then flushed all over her face and forehead. She clasped her hands together, and remained for some minutes quite speechless.

"Oh, papa," she cried at last—with a catching breath and a heaving bosom, as she put out her hand to take her father's—"is it not grand? Is it not a noble statue? They cannot refuse it!"

Meo stole up to her side, and got her other hand. The acceptance of his statue by the committee could give him, at all events for the moment, no such delight as he felt at reading in Nora's face, unmistakably, the effect his work produced on her.

"Yes—it is doubtless a fine statue. I make you my compliments on it, Signor Meo. I really think that it is a very fine statue," said the druggist, with all his eyes on the statue; while Meo was all but kneeling on the other side of Nora, and covering her hand with kisses.

"I think the presentation of the man, as I see it in my imagination, is what it ought to be. I do not know if I have been able to embody my thought. I have tried hard, and have done my best," said Meo.

"It moves me more than any statue I ever saw. If it is possible for a face to express all that would be in the mind of such a man, when looking up to heaven, you have made that face express it, Signor Meo."

"Ah, Nora! come what will, nothing can rob me of the reward for all my toil, which you have now given me," cried Meo, rapturously, and absolutely forgetting the presence of Signor Marini.

"But what the committee may say to it we cannot tell," remarked the druggist, in a rapture-dispelling tone.

"Alas! no! And . . . have you heard, Signor Marini? . . . the committee have received an offer to execute the statue for nothing. It is very hard! My own old master too!—to think that he should be so anxious to keep me down! I cannot tell you how that has hurt me. It has cut me to the heart. They know that I cannot afford to execute the statue for nothing."

"When is the decision to be made known?" asked Marini.

"Very soon—in a day or two. It was decided last night that it should be left to the judgment of one single person," said Meo.

"*O Dio!* Who—who is it?" exclaimed Nora, turning very pale.

"A true artist, and a real judge," replied Meo. "It is Signor Bracciale of Rome. He is very old

now, and it is long since he has worked; but for many years he was allowed to be the first sculptor in Italy. He happens to be coming here; and when the committee heard it, they resolved to settle all disputes by leaving the decision to him, and taking as definitive his opinion."

"But that is good news, Signor Meo, is it not? If he is a real and great artist, we are safe," said Nora, forgetting in her emotion all that the use of the plural pronoun implied.

"I hope that it is good news for me," Meo said aloud; adding, in a whisper in her ear, "Is it good news for you, too, dearest darling? Certainly," he went on aloud, "Signor Bracciale can have no prejudice against me. I must think that if my statue deserves to be accepted it will be accepted."

"Then I am sure that it will be accepted—sure of it! But if Signor Bracciale has no prejudice against you, Signor Meo, he may have a prejudice in favour of Signor Biraggini! Oh, is it not too bad—is it not base of Signor Biraggini, papa?" said Nora, panting with eagerness and emotion.

"Well, of course everybody thinks first of himself, *cara mia! Che vuoi?* Naturally, Biraggini does not wish to be cut out," said the druggist.

"But he *will* be cut out!—and it will serve him right! I hate him! You have no reason for thinking, Signor Meo—have you?—that this Signor Bracciale is prejudiced in favour of that odious

man?" said Nora, looking into her lover's face with eager eyes.

"I suppose they must have been friends. Signor Biraggini is only a few years younger than Bracciale; they must have known each other; and Biraggini has a great name. But everybody speaks very highly of Signor Bracciale: they say that he is before all else an artist, and thoroughly a *galantuomo*. They tell me that if he thinks my statue worthy of acceptance, nothing will prevent his saying so," said Meo.

"And his decision is to be final?"

"So it was resolved last night."

"And he is to be here very soon?"

"He arrives from Rome to-morrow. The day after to-morrow, in all probability, all will be decided," said Meo, wistfully.

"Well, my opinion is that it is a good statue," said the druggist again. "I hope you may be successful, Signor Meo. And if you are, he added—with a significant look, as he gave the young artist his hand, preparatory to quitting the studio—"why, we will have another talk upon that matter you were speaking of at the 'Bottegone' the other night."

CHAPTER VII.

BETWEEN DINNER AND SIESTA.

No game of cards was played in the Signora Dorotea's "salottino" on the second-floor over the "Farmacio alle libra" on that Sunday afternoon, for the time was occupied by the druggist's wife and her reverend friend and counsellor in more interesting conversation.

As soon as Nora and her father had left the house, the Canon, taking a seat on the little sofa by the lady's side, entered at once upon the subject the discussion of which he had waited that moment to begin.

"I have something to tell you, *cara mia*, which I don't above half like. Signor Giuseppe has written to Berni's lawyer, in reply to an invitation from the latter to come to a definitive arrangement respecting Nora's marriage, putting him off in a manner which makes me very strongly suspect that he has other ideas in his head. He and Nora have had more talk together lately than quite pleases me; and, if we don't mind what we are about, he will give the girl to that sculptor after all!—that is,

supposing him to get the commission for the 'Galileo.' "

"*O poverino!* what fly can have bitten him, to put such an absurdity into his poor head? But then that animal of a Meo won't get the commission—that's one comfort! Bah! I've no patience with such folly!" said the lady, very inclined to be cross at being bothered just at that moment by talk on an unpleasant subject, instead of having her usual game of cards.

"But that is just the point on which I was going to speak, *cara mia!* I don't feel at all sure that he will not get the commission—that's the mischief of it. A plague on the statue to Galileo—a statue to a fellow who at the best was a heretic! *Misericordia!* what times we live in!"

"But I thought, *caro*, that you had arranged matters so that the statue, at all events, would not be done by him?" said the Signora Dorotea, with a strong faith in the omnipotence of her ecclesiastical friend.

"I have done all that was possible. The committee are as headstrong as mules! I have got them an offer to have the statue made for nothing, and—would you believe such stupidity!—they make an objection to the trouble there would be in returning all the subscriptions! And now, last night, despite all that I and one or two friends could say against it, they have come to a determination to leave the decision of the matter

absolutely to a Signor Bracciale, who is expected here from Rome to-morrow."

"Santa Maria! And who is this Signor Bracciale, pray?" asked the lady, opening wide her large black eyes.

"Bracciale is himself a sculptor, who has lived most of his life at Rome. He is quite an old man, who has for some time past given up work himself; but some years ago he had the reputation of being the first sculptor in Italy."

"And they have determined to do just what he tells them in the matter? *Misericordia!* what stupid things men are!" exclaimed Signora Dorotea, lifting her hands, eyes, and shoulders.

"Stupid enough! However, that is what they have resolved to do," returned the Canon.

"And what will this "forestiere" from Rome tell them?"

"Aye, that is the question."

"But, Signor Canonico, you always know what everybody is likely to say or to do."

"Not always. I had never thought, for instance, that Signor Giuseppe would have dreamed of listening to this pestilent fellow as a suitor for his daughter!"

"Ah, Giuseppe, *povera anima!* Certainly, there's no counting on what folly he may take into his head. But as to this Signor Bra—Brac—this Roman man?"

"Well, I am not without hope. If I could see

the Signor Varalla's model—if I knew how he had treated the subject—I should be better able to form an opinion. Signor Bracciale has always been a religious man—has always stood well with the Church . . . and at Rome, you know. If the model has anything offensive to the Church in the way it is treated, we may depend on Bracciale to condemn it, let its other merits be what they may. That is our best chance!”

“But is there no way of—of—giving Signor Bracciale a hint—you know? A foreigner! What does he know? Of course it is necessary that he should be made to understand who is who, and what is what, here in Florence.”

“*Lasci fare a me!* Leave me alone to think of all that. Of course, I shall take care that proper representations are made to him. But, you see, the man is a sculptor. These artists are the devil! They are so apt to think that their art is the most important thing in the world. If there is nothing to be said against Varalla's statue on the score of religion, and if he thinks it otherwise good, I am very much afraid he may speak in favour of it. Biraggini was an old friend of his—that is one point in our favour. And I shall take care that it is well represented to him what a slap in the face he will be giving him, if he decides in favour of this upstart's work!”

“*Bravo, caro mio!* An old man is surely not likely to prefer a boy's work to that of an old

friend of his own, and of his own time," said the Signora Dorotea, shrewdly.

"I should hope not; but I don't know. Signor Bracciale is said to be a very popular man with the young artists in Rome—a patron of rising talent, and all that sort of nonsense. But he will be severe as to the meaning and tendency of the statue—that is our best hope."

"And you say it is likely enough that this impious fellow should have put some wicked meaning into his statue, eh?"

"Well, yes; I think it very likely, most likely, that he has treated it in some way that would be justly offensive to good churchmen. If he has only taken any of the hints, as to the conception of the subject, which I took care to have suggested to him, we are safe enough."

"*Ahi me!* what a troublesome world it is! And what a thing it is for a poor woman to have a husband with so poor a head as that *poverino* Giuseppe! What in the world should I do, *cara*, without your friendship?" sighed the Signora Dorotea, with a languishing look at the portly Canon by her side.

"You know, *cara*, that your interests are mine. I only hope that I may be able to bring this matter to a favourable ending. But I confess I am not easy about it," replied the Canon.

"And when is this Signor—what is his name?—this *Romano*, to see the model Meo Varalla has made?"

“Probably on Tuesday. Signor Varalla has been informed by the committee—by our committee, that is—that if they should be so advised by Signor Bracciale, they will make no further opposition to intrusting the work to him. I wish I could see the model the man has made—I should know better what to think about it then,” added the Canon, after a pause.

“And you really think that, if the young fellow gets the commission, Signor Giuseppe will be fool enough to give our daughter to him?” said Signora Dorotea, pressing her lips, and nodding her head up and down.

“I am very much afraid so.”

“*Ahi me!* Such folly makes me sick. I wish all the statues and all the sculptors were at the bottom of the Red Sea, for my part!”

“*Cara mio!*” returned the Canon Buti, taking her fat little hand, and patting it between both his, “there would be small harm done if they were so. But don’t vex yourself till you get a nervous attack, my poor friend. Let us hope for the best.”

And then, to avoid the chance of a nervous attack, the lady arranged herself comfortably in her corner of the sofa, and soon fell into a comfortable after-dinner doze, while the Canon very shortly afterwards imitated her example in his corner of the sofa.

Some hours later, when the farmacia was closed

for the night, and the druggist's family had gone to their chambers, the thread with the little bag at the end of it came quivering down from Nora's window; a figure started out from the shade of the buttress on the other side of the way, and quickly taking from the little receptacle the paper it contained, replaced it by another, which the watcher above lost no time in possessing herself of.

In it she read as follows:—

“It has been settled, my own best and dearest! that the Signor Professor Bracciale is to come to the studio on Tuesday. Think of the hours of anxiety till then! If he approves, all will, I trust, go well; if he frowns, all will be lost. Pray for me, my sweet Nora! I know that these hours will be terrible to you too, my own one! Would it be possible See now! Tuesday is a *festa*. Would it be possible, do you think, to induce your father to come with you to the studio at the hour when the Professor will be there? It would be all the more terrible, it is true, if the Professor's opinion is against me. But if he praises—don't think me too conceited, my treasure; I speak to you as to my own soul—if he praises, it may have an effect on your father favourable to our wishes. May God in heaven grant it! The Professor will be at the studio at three o'clock. If you *could* be there a little before. . . .—Your own MEo.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DECISION.

THE state of anxiety in which Nora and Meo passed the hours that intervened between that Sunday night and the Tuesday afternoon following may be readily imagined. Nora had within the last week or two been more with her father, as the Rev. Canon Buti had remarked, than had been usual in the druggist's family. And this intercourse, though nothing positive had passed between her father and herself on the subject, had led Nora to feel tolerably sure that her father would make no further opposition to her marriage with the sculptor, *if* he should be successful in obtaining the commission for the "Galileo." For Nora, therefore, *everything* depended on the issue of the judgment to be pronounced on the Tuesday.

For Meo the decision would involve, as far as it was possible to see into the future, the "To be or not to be" of his whole career and life. His love and his artistic success were equally at stake.

Signor Giuseppe also had, on his part, become

not a little interested in the upshot of the Roman sculptor's opinion. It was important to him to avoid that examination into his affairs which would necessarily result from his professing any longer to entertain the notion of an alliance between his daughter and the son of *fattore* Berni. Nobody knew better than the old druggist that when the affairs of a trader and speculator have gone somewhat to the bad, the best chance for the restoration of them, if there be any such chance, must lie in the concealment of the fact that there is anything amiss with them. Then, putting aside such considerations, it would have been extremely disagreeable to him to have to avow to his wife and to the Canon Buti—in his thoughts upon the subject, he assumed, as the most natural fact in the world, that to tell anything to one of these persons was to tell it to both)—that he was, at all events for the present, unable to provide such a dowry for his daughter as the Bernis had been led to expect, and would insist upon. It was far better and easier to assume the *sic volo sic jubeo* of domestic autocracy, and say that it was his will and pleasure to marry his daughter to Meo Varalla, the successful sculptor. And Meo, as he very well knew, would be overjoyed to take her without any further expectations than such as might arise from the contingencies of her father's ability and goodwill. Signor Giuseppe found himself in a position of difficulty and em-

barrassment, and the easiest, directest, and most satisfactory way out of it would be a marriage between Nora and Meo.

La Signora Dorotea and her friend and coadjutor the Canon were also, as has partly been seen by the conversation between them recorded in the last chapter, not a little anxious on the same subject. It had become pretty clear to them, also, that the druggist was coming to the determination to give Nora to Signor Varalla, if, by the obtaining of this important commission, he should be placed fairly on the way of success in his profession. And this was on many accounts very distasteful both to the lady and her reverend friend. La Signora Dorotea very strongly objected to the artist, because he *was* an artist, and—what was nearly the same thing—a Liberal; and, most of all, a poor artist. She objected very strongly also, because she *had* objected—because she had said that no such marriage should be. Finally, she very much objected because the Rev. Canon Buti did not approve it.

The Canon for his part, besides these reasons, which he shared with Signora Dorotea, had others of his own. The proposed match with the Bernis was of *his* projecting. *He* had promised young Simone Berni a rich wife. He was anxious to please the *fattore*, and to stand in the light of a benefactor to him, for reasons of his own. And it was excessively disagreeable to him that all these

plans and purposes should be brought to nought by the silly love-fancies of a disobedient girl. He had accordingly done everything in his power to secure the result he desired. It had been duly whispered in the ear of Signor Bracciale that this Varalla was a *mauvais sujet*—the last man to whom a work, in which the interests of religion and of the Church might be compromised, ought to be intrusted; that all the right-thinking part of the community were averse to his being chosen for the work; that the Signor Professor Biraggini was willing to undertake it for the mere honour of the thing; and that, though it was true he had not yet made any model, it would be quite safe to leave the work in such hands as his. To all which old Signor Bracciale had listened, nodding his head gravely as he did so. But the only word that could be got from him was, “We must see what the young man has done!”

Signor Giuseppe Marini had become so much interested in the issue of the matter himself, that Nora had found no great difficulty, inasmuch as the Tuesday was a *festa*, in persuading her father to take her that afternoon, as Meo had suggested, to the studio in the Via della Scala. When the time came for starting on the expedition, she felt desperately afraid of it, and almost repented having undertaken it. What—*what* should she do if the verdict were an adverse one? It was not to be expected that the judge would in that case forth-

with and openly speak his condemnation. But Nora felt sure that she should know, without any spoken word, what his spoken opinion would be. But Meo wished her to be there—expected her. And, since it was in her power to do as he wished her, she would not for worlds shrink from the ordeal.

Accordingly, at a little before three, Signor Giuseppe and Nora knocked at the door of the studio. They found the artist alone. Being a *festa*, there were no workmen in the outer rooms. Meo opened the door to his visitors himself. He was in a state of feverish agitation and restlessness pitiable to see. There was the model in his little sanctum on its pedestal, with an extemporised background of green baize stretched behind it. The huge paper-blinds, with which the little room was furnished after the fashion of such places, had been arranged in such a manner as to throw the lights and shades in the most favourable manner, according to the artist's conception of his work. Again and again he kept turning the statue on its movable pedestal, and modifying the arrangement of the light a little this way and a little that. Then he would sit down on the little old well-worn sofa before it, and then in the next instant jump up to rearrange the position with reference to the light.

“Well, my opinion is that it is a good statue!”

said the druggist sententiously, as he stood with his hands behind his back gazing at it.

“Good! It is glorious!—it is sublime! If the man is not blind, he must admire it. He must see that it is one of the finest modern works he has ever seen. It must be successful!” cried Nora, enthusiastically.

“I think it seems to satisfy me less than it did. I see faults in it I did not see before—things that I know I could improve,” said poor Meo, nervously.

“Where shall we go when he comes, Signor Meo?” said Nora. “I don’t think I can bear being here to watch his face as he examines it. I could not stand it. Besides, perhaps he would not like it. He would feel a sort of *soggezzione*.”

“When he knocks at the door you can go in here, if Signor Giuseppe will excuse having to wait in such a corner. See—there is a large window-recess, which would never have been there if this had been built for a studio, and which I have shut out by my green curtain. You will hear what he says, though I don’t suppose he’ll say much, and you can come out as soon as he is gone. He won’t be long, I take it.”

And then, after a minute or two more, a knock was heard at the door. The Professor was very punctual to his appointment. Meo’s heart gave a great bound, and he turned as pale as a sheet as the knock made them all jump. Nora and he

interchanged one look—a bright and reassuring one on Nora's part—and one close and strong grasp of the hand; and then the druggist and his daughter stepped behind the green baize screen.

It was a great relief to Meo to find, on opening the door, that the Professor had had the delicacy of feeling to come alone. He bowed to him, and attempted to say a few words; but the sounds died upon his lips, and he led his visitor in silence to the inner room, and with a simple gesture of his hand towards the model stepped back, to leave his judge free to move round the statue in every direction.

The watchfulness of Meo's eye, as it scanned the old sculptor's face, may be imagined. But he could read nothing there. He could only mark that the old man kept his lips firmly pressed together. He stood before the statue with his back and shoulders bent forwards, his chin a little raised, and his forehead contracted into vertical wrinkles by the intentness of his gaze. He said no word; but when Meo was about to turn the statue on its pedestal, he arrested him by putting his hand on his sleeve, indicating his wish that the pose should not be altered.

And this continued for several minutes in profound silence, till it seemed to both the beating hearts in front of the screen and behind it that they could endure no more.

At last the Professor suddenly put out his hand, and grasped that of the young sculptor.

"*Figlia mio!* I congratulate you!" he said. "It is a noble statue. At your age I had never done anything half so good."

"Oh, Signor Professore! . . . You think, then, that I may hope that it will be accepted by the committee?"

"*Diamine!* Accepted! If they are not both blind and mad, they will jump at it. Where, I should like to know, are they going to get anything half as good? The conception is thoroughly poetic, and the execution admirable."

"Signor Professore, you are breathing life into me!" said poor Meo, with the tears in his eyes, as his colour went and came. "And you do not see anything in it that—anything that can offend . . . certain susceptibilities . . ."

"*No! Davvero!* Ah, I forgot, in looking at the statue. Yes, they told me that your work would probably be conceived in an offensive spirit. *Che!* All stuff and nonsense! Our Holy Father might approve that model . . . would approve it with all his heart, I know, if he could see it."

Just at that moment the old Professor was startled, and a sudden flush of blood rushed all over Meo's face; for from behind the green baize screen at the back of the statue a sudden sharp cry was heard, and then violent hysteric laughter mixed with alternations of sobbing. And then in the next moment the head of Signor Giuseppe was pushed

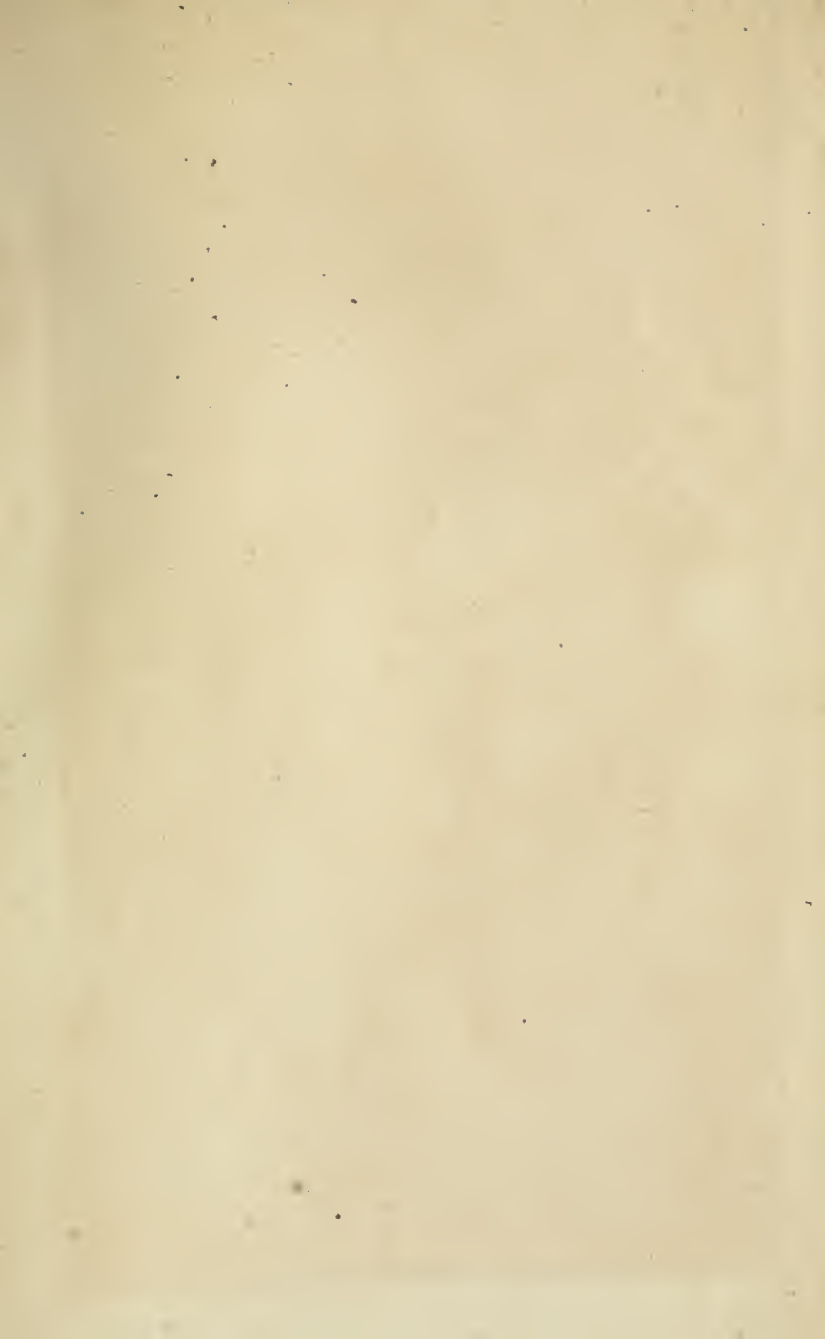
out, with an entreaty for a glass of water, and an open window for his daughter!

Meo dashed in behind the screen, and, bringing out the half-unconscious form of Nora, placed her on the little sofa, while the old Professor looked on in speechless astonishment.

Of course it became necessary to tell him the whole state of the case. And when he understood that his words had been the cause of throwing his unseen hearer into the condition of agitation in which he saw her, and why, the old man united his cares to theirs to restore her; and then, when this had been accomplished, had the great pleasure of repeating all he said in praise of Meo's workmanship to a listener whose eyes repaid him for every word he said, and of finding that his honest verdict had assured to the young sculptor not only a career—but a wife!

And so Meo Varalla's first commission and first love were won!

THE END.





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